

Prologue: Where it all began

October 31, 1981

At the edge of the woods on the outskirts of the village of Godric's Hollow, an elderly man with snow-white hair and beard appeared out of nowhere. His name was Albus Dumbledore. He had come from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry right after the end of the Halloween Feast, feeling that something was dreadfully wrong somewhere.

He walked around the village to the other side, toward a two-story house set apart from any other. As he neared it, he stopped, his magical senses having detected no sign of the wards supposed to be on the house.

Then, several flashes of multi-colored lights appeared in the windows on the ground floor of the house. Dumbledore noticed that the front door was askew and wide open.

With no further hesitation, he apparated directly into the living room. Appearing with barely a sound, he saw three Death Eaters standing with their backs to him. One of them had his wand out, focused on a man writhing on the floor of the living room, apparently in pain from the Cruciatus curse.

Before they could detect he was there, Dumbledore quickly stunned the three Death Eaters then conjured ropes to bind them securely.

He then checked on the man who was being tortured, confirming that it was James Potter. James was alive but unconscious. Dumbledore conjured a stretcher and levitated James onto it.

He stepped up to the captured Death Eaters and removed their masks, revealing them to be Rodolphus Lestrangle, his wife Bellatrix and his brother Rabastan.

Then, he heard a loud bang coming from the second floor. *Harry! Lily! Rose!*

Dumbledore apparated up to the top of the stairs. He hurried to the first room, Harry's room.

There, he found Harry sitting in the midst of his wrecked crib, apparently unharmed. Then, Dumbledore noticed a strange lightning shaped scar on the boy's forehead, still oozing a little blood.

A groan drew him toward the side of the room, where he found Lily under a small pile of wood. Dumbledore quickly vanished the wood.

"Ma," Harry cried. He started to crawl toward her.

"Hold it, young one," Dumbledore said. He picked up the boy along with a toy snitch that was in the ruins of the crib, "Here, play with this for a while."

Dumbledore then conjured another stretcher and levitated Lily on to it. He then heard crying from further down the hall. He hurried down to the next room, which was the Potter's master bedroom.

In another crib beside the master bed was the latest addition to the Potter family. Rose Lily Potter had been born in this house at the end of August, right after the Potters had moved in. She was a lovely girl with Lily's red hair and James' hazel eyes.

Dumbledore gently picked her up and placed her on the stretcher beside her mother. Still carrying Harry, he then moved the stretcher down to the ground floor.

After placing Harry on the sofa, he moved to the fireplace and threw some floo powder into it. "Remus Lupin," he called into the greenish flames.

After a few seconds of disorientation, he saw a man with short light brown hair and threadbare robes sitting in a kitchen.

"Professor Dumbledore!" he said, after noticing his former headmaster's head in the fireplace, "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"Yes, Remus," the elderly wizard replied, "I am at the Potters' place in Godric's Hallow. They were attacked by Death Eaters. I believe Voldemort was with them but I am not sure where he is now."

"Death Eaters! But how, Professor," Remus exclaimed, "What about the Fidelius charm?"

"I wondered about that myself, Remus," Dumbledore said, "Where is Sirius?"

"Right here, Professor," a new voice spoke out from behind Remus, "I was about to go to bed but I heard your voice. Come on, Remus. Let's get over there."

A few minutes later, both Sirius and Remus were in the Potters' living room, looking at their two friends. Sirius was holding Rose while Remus was carrying Harry.

"So, Sirius," Dumbledore said, "You said that you changed places with Peter as the secret keeper?"

"Yes, Professor," Sirius said, "We did that because I thought Voldemort would go after me, knowing that James and I were best friends. I thought that they would not suspect Peter to be the secret keeper."

"It seems you were wrong," Remus said, "Otherwise, how would they have found out about this place?"

"For now, we have to get James and Lily to St. Mungo's so they can be properly treated," Dumbledore said, "The aurors can take care of these three."

"Okay, Professor," Sirius said, "Remus and I will take care of Harry and Rose while their parents are at St. Mungo's."

"Do you know how to take care of two children, Sirius?" Dumbledore asked with a small smile on his face.

“Um, not really, Professor. It can’t be that hard,” Sirius replied, ignoring the smirk of amusement on Remus’ face, “After all, we’ve seen Lily and James do it often enough.”

“Maybe you can do fine with Harry,” Dumbledore said, “But with Rose being so young, it may be more difficult. Besides, the two of you have to find Peter and discover how Voldemort bypassed the Fidelius charm.”

“All right, Professor,” Sirius said begrudgingly, “But then who will care for the two kids?”

“Oh, I think I have the right family to care for them for a few days,” Dumbledore said, “I believe you both have met Arthur and Molly Weasley from the Order?”

“Oh yeah,” Sirius said, “They’re the redheaded couple, right. I think they got several kids, all boys.”

“Yes and no,” Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling, “They are both redheads, yes. But while they do have six boys including one Harry’s age, they also have a new baby girl, who was born only two weeks before Rose.”

“I guess that’s all right, Albus,” Remus said, “With so many kids, they should be able to care for Harry and Rose.”

“Good, that’s settled,” Dumbledore said, “Now, let’s get James and Lily to St. Mungo’s.”

Much later, Sirius and Remus were dozing in the waiting room of St. Mungo’s. Harry was busy playing with his toy snitch while Rose was fast asleep in Remus’ arms.

Sirius’ head came up when he heard approaching footsteps. He saw Dumbledore and stood up.

“Well, Professor? How are they?” he asked the elderly man.

“They’re going to be fine, Sirius,” Dumbledore reassured him, “In spite of being under the Cruciatus curse, James will be recovered

after a few days of rest. Lily has a possible concussion, so she needs to be observed for a day or two.”

“Have you found out what happened, Professor?” Remus asked.

“Yes, Remus. I managed to talk to Lily before the healers gave her a Dreamless Sleep Potion. It seems that Voldemort blasted his way into the house with three of his Death Eaters. James made Lily run upstairs to protect Harry and Rose. The three Death Eaters kept James occupied while Voldemort chased down Lily. He caught her inside Harry’s room just as she was about to pick him up. She tried to block his way but he blasted her aside. Just before she lost consciousness, she saw Voldemort cast the Killing Curse on Harry.”

“Then why isn’t Harry dead?” Sirius asked, “What happened to Voldemort?”

“It appears Lily’s attempt to protect Harry passed on some form of blood protection to him and somehow reflected the Killing curse back at Voldemort,” Dumbledore said, “It hit Voldemort and he vanished in some form of explosion,”

“Then Voldemort’s dead?” Remus asked.

“I’m afraid not, Remus,” Dumbledore said, “Remember the prophecy.”

“You mean that Harry’s the one mentioned in it, Professor?” Remus asked, “Not the Longbottom boy?”

“Yes, Remus,” Dumbledore said, “Tonight, Voldemort marked Harry as his equal. That scar on his forehead is a residue of the Killing Curse. This fulfills part of the prophecy. Somehow, Voldemort will return someday and Harry will have to face him to completely fulfill it.”

“Poor little guy,” Sirius said, watching his godson playing, “He shouldn’t have to do that.”

“I know, Sirius. At least we and his parents will be here to help him prepare for that final confrontation,” Dumbledore said.

“Albus, we’re here,” a female voice came from behind them.

Turning, they saw a small plump woman in her thirties holding a baby in her arms. Beside her were two small boys, one of them holding the hands of a toddler. All had red hair.

“Ah, Molly,” Dumbledore said, “You’re right on time. I believe you’ve met Sirius Black and Remus Lupin?”

“Yes, Albus,” she replied, then turned to the two, “Hello, Sirius. Hello, Remus.”

“Good evening, Mrs. Weasley,” the two men said, together as they stood up.

“Please, call me Molly,” she said. Then, gesturing at each child, she said, “This is Bill, Charlie and,” gesturing to the toddler, “Ron.” Nodding toward the baby in her arms, “This is Ginny. Bill, please hold onto her.” She passed the baby to the oldest boy.

Remus approached her, “This is Rose,” he said to her as he placed Rose in her arms.

“Oh, she’s a sweet girl. She looks almost like Ginny,” Molly said, smiling and gazing down at her. She then looked at Harry, “I assume that’s Harry.”

“Yes,” Sirius answered. He then bent down beside Harry.

“Harry, Mrs. Weasley is going to take care of you for a bit while your mum and dad are resting, okay? Uncle Remus and I have to look for Uncle Peter,” Sirius said to him.

Harry looked up at Sirius with a curious look on his face. He looked at Molly then back to Sirius before smiling and playing again with his toy snitch.

“Charlie, place Ron next to Harry so they can play,” Molly said to the second boy.

“Right,” Sirius said, standing up, “come on, Remus. We’d better get going.”

As he and Remus walked down to corridor toward the entrance, Sirius looked back for a second. He was a bit surprised to see Harry allow Ron to hold his toy snitch since the boy had refused to let go of it since he gave it to him for his birthday. He smiled to himself thinking that Harry had made his first friend.

Chapter 1: First time to Hogwart's

September 1, 1991

"Come on, Dad! Hurry up," the black-haired boy cried over his shoulder, his almond-shaped green eyes sparkling with joy, "we have to get to the platform before the Weasleys." He was pushing a trolley with a trunk and a birdcage containing a white owl in it.

"Slow down, son," his father said, hurrying up to the boy, "I'm sure we'll be there before them."

Father and son looked almost alike including the messy black hair and glasses they both wore except that the father had hazel eyes and, if you watched the boy's forehead, a lightning shaped scar could be seen behind his front bangs.

"Yes, Harry," the red-haired woman walking beside the man said, laughter in her voice, "I think we'll be early enough. I don't see why you're so eager. You just saw Ron yesterday."

Her eyes were the same color and shape as the boy's. She was holding hands with a small girl who had brown eyes and the same hair as the woman.

"Yes, especially since it isn't even 10 yet!" the man muttered to her, "Really, Lily. It just seems too early."

"Now, James," the woman said, lowering her voice so their son couldn't hear them, "You know why we're this early. By now, the press knows that Harry is going off to Hogwarts for the first time. All that boy-who-lived and boy-who-beat-you-know-who business is hard on him. You know how he hates all that attention. Remember the time we were at Diagon Alley when he was three?"

James grimaced, "Yes, I remember. The poor little tyke, all those people crowding around him, all the flashbulbs from those reporters. He was scared to leave his room for a whole month. I guess he's too excited now to realize the press may be here. So, its good if we're here early."

Soon, the four people who were the Potters came up to the barrier between Platforms 9 and 10.

“Now, remember, son,” the man said, “take a run at the wall and you’ll go through. Just make sure there are no muggles looking.”

“All right, Dad,” Harry said, looking around. Seeing no one paying attention to them, he moved quickly at a run and passed right through the wall.

“I wish I was going too, Mum,” the girl said to her mother as they watched her father follow her brother.

“Now, Rose. You know you’re not of age yet,” Lily said, “It’s just another year. Anyway, you have Ginny to play with all year and next year, the two of you will join your brothers.”

Rose’s face lit up in a smile as she remembered her best friend and fellow red-head. Lily then coaxed her daughter with her through the barrier.

Once through, they saw Harry gazing in awe at the red Hogwarts Express. The train also amazed Rose.

“Go on, son,” James said, “Find a compartment for you and your friends. I’ll help you with your trunk.” James then did a levitation charm on the trunk and pushed it slowly towards the train, following his son.

Harry soon found a compartment near the end of the train and leaned out the window, waving to his parents and sister. Then, as more people started filling the platform, he sat down and moved his bangs to cover his scar.

Several reporters soon spotted Harry’s family, especially his father who was Head Auror of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement of the Ministry of Magic. They practically ran over each other in their hurry to reach them.

“Mr. Potter, how does Harry feel about going to Hogwarts?”

“Mr. Potter, do you expect him to do well?”

“Are you expecting special treatment for him, as he is the boy-who-lived?”

“Where is your son, anyway? Is he on the train?”

James did his best to fend off the questions by answering them quickly, while Harry scrunched down in his seat so they wouldn't see him on the train.

He wished the Weasleys would arrive so he could spend time with Ron. They had known each other since they were a year old, spending weekends and summers in each other's house. Harry loved the Burrow as much as Potter Manor, his father's ancestral home. In spite of a more than adequate income due to his job as Deputy Minister for Muggle Affairs, Arthur Weasley kept his family in his old family home that looked like it was held up only by magic.

Because of his mother being muggleborn, he and his sister had learned about Muggle science and gadgets. They had 2 televisions, a refrigerator, stereos, radios and other electrical appliances. They've gone to concerts of the Weird Sisters and Duran Duran, watched Quidditch and Cricket matches in the same week and been to both Wizarding and Muggle places in America, Europe and Africa, often with the Weasleys.

Then, he heard Molly Weasley's voice, “There they are, Arthur! Come along, Ron”

Harry raised his head just enough to peer out just above the window's bottom. He saw the Weasleys greet his parents. He saw his sister enthusiastically hugging Ginny Weasley, looking like sisters rather than just best friends.

Harry smirked. Like peas in a pod, those two were. He wondered how it would be next year when the two girls joined them at Hogwart's. Should be fun, seeing how vibrant and energetic they both were, and both good at Quidditch as the boys had learned that summer.

Then Harry saw his freckle-faced best friend peer around his parents, apparently looking for him. Harry grinned at the sight of the redhead, already his mother's height.

"Psst, Ron, over here," he whispered to him.

Ron saw him and slowly edged away from the crowd of reporters. Then he climbed aboard the train and hurried to Harry's compartment.

When Ron reached it, he plopped himself into the seat across from Harry.

"Can you believe the circus out there, Harry?" he asked Harry, "All of them looking for a glimpse of the boy-who-lived. It's a good thing your parents and mine are there to deflect their attention."

"You said it, Ron," Harry said, grimacing and scrunching down again in his seat, "There are times I hate being me, all that fuss, just because of something that happened years ago when I was in nappies. After all this time, you'd think they'd forgot about it. I mean, they've seen me from time to time over the past ten years."

"Yeah, well, that's reporters for you," Ron said, "Anything for a story. Don't worry, mate," he put a hand on Harry's shoulder, "It'll blow over once we're in school. If anyone bothers you there, I'll handle it."

"Thanks, mate," Harry said, smiling, "Now I remember why I keep you around."

"Hey!" Ron exclaimed, indignation on his face.

They soon started talking about Hogwarts and what to expect there, based on what Ron's brothers and their parents had told them. They were particularly apprehensive about the sorting.

Fred and George, Ron's twin older brothers who were entering their third year, had told them several wild stories of how students were sorted into the four different houses ranging from having to fight a troll to trying to perform some magic.

A few minutes later, the twins came into the compartment.

“Hello, Harry,” Fred said, or was it George.

“Hello, Wonnykins,” the other twin said.

Ron’s face grew red in indignation, “Don’t call me that, George.”

“Now, now, Ronald,” Fred said, “We were just teasing.”

“Yeah, lighten up, little bro,” George said.

“Are you two ready for your first year?” Fred asked.

Harry and Ron grinned at the twins. “Of course, we are,” they answered together.

“Harry, we were wondering. Now that you’ll be in Hogwart’s, we’d like to you to consider starting a new generation of Marauders,” Fred said.

“Yeah, after all those stories your Dad and Sirius have told us, we’d love to start a new foursome in pranking,” George said, “We couldn’t do it before since only “Perfect Percy” was there with us.”

“It’ll be worse now that he’s a prefect,” Fred said, “Hogwart’s is so dull sometimes, it needs some laughs and livening up.”

“I don’t know, guys,” Harry said, “Dad would like nothing more than to see a new generation of Marauders. Sirius, too. Even Remus would be pleased. But, Mum had a talk with me last night and she forbade me to get into any trouble with pranks.”

“Please, Harry,” the twins pleaded, showing him their sad puppy dog look which often broke down their mother’s resolve.

“All right, all right,” Harry said, “I’ll think about it. But if we get caught, I’m blaming the two of you.” He could see Ron grinning out of the corner of his eye.

“Yeah!” the twins high-fived each other then said goodbye to the two younger boys.

Soon the train’s whistle blew, announcing its departure. Harry and Ron now climbed up to the window and waved goodbye to their

parents and sisters. The reporters, upon seeing Harry, rushed towards the train but failed to get near it.

As they pulled out of the station, Harry looked back. The last thing he saw were two redheaded girls running after the train until they reached the end of the platform, waving frantically at them. Harry shook his head in wonder at their enthusiasm. He realized he would miss them, even if they were often exasperating.

As the express wound its way north, the boys settled down to a game of wizard chess. After Ron beat Harry for the third time, they switched to Exploding Snap. When the lunch trolley came, they bought themselves a large amount of food and candy.

As they were eating, the compartment door opened. In the doorway stood a boy with white-blond hair flanked by two larger boys who looked rather dull.

"So, it's true, then," the blonde said, "Harry Potter is going to Hogwart's."

Harry scowled. He had heard of this boy, or rather his father. He was Draco Malfoy whose father, Lucius Malfoy, was said to be a follower of Voldemort. But he had claimed to be under the Imperius curse at that time, so he wasn't charged. That frustrated Harry's Dad no end.

"What of it, Malfoy?" he asked the blonde, "I'm just another boy going to school."

"Oh, you'll never be just another school boy, Potter," Draco sneered, "After what you did to the Dark Lord, how can you be, just ordinary."

Harry glared at him, "Is that all you want, to gawk at the bloody boy-who-lived, like any fawning fan?"

"No, Potter," Draco said, "I was wondering if you'd rather associate with those of similar status and history as your family than some upstarts." He gazed at Ron.

Ron stood up, his face red with anger. Harry held him back as he said, "No, thanks, Malfoy. Don't forget that I'm a halfblood because of my

mother. I would have thought that would put you off associating with me.”

Just when Malfoy was about to answer back, a voice said, “What’s going on here?”

Harry and Ron saw Percy behind Malfoy’s goons.

Malfoy saw the prefect badge pinned prominently on the older boy’s robes. He scowled and said, “This isn’t over, Potter.” He then turned around and headed down the corridor, followed by the two larger boys.

“What was that about, Harry, Ron?” Percy asked them.

“Nothing, Perce,” Harry answered, “Just a social call. It’s okay.”

“Well, all right,” Percy said, looking unconvinced. He closed the compartment door.

The boys were silent for a while, then went back to playing Exploding Snap.

As the sun started to go down, their compartment’s door again opened. This time, a girl with bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth stood in the doorway.

“Have any of you seen a frog anywhere?” she asked in a bossy tone, “A boy named Neville seems to have lost it.”

“Umm, no, we haven’t,” Harry answered.

The girl looked at Harry for a moment then exclaimed, “You’re Harry Potter. I heard you were aboard this train. I’ve read about you in *Who’s who in the Magical World*, *Modern Magical History* and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*. ” She stuck out her hand, “I’m Hermione Granger.”

Harry shook her hand gingerly.

She then looked at Ron. “And you are...?”

“Ron Weasley,” Ron replied, “Harry and I have been best friends since we were babies.”

“Charmed,” Hermione said, but she didn’t offer her hand to be shaken.

“You boys better change into your Hogwarts robes,” she said, “We’ll be arriving soon.”

She moved to leave then turned back to Ron, “By the way, you have some dirt on your face. Did you know that?” She then went out, the door closing behind her.

Ron wiped at his face then looked at his hand. Finding nothing on it, he said, “Bonkers that one.”

The two boys then got into their Hogwart’s robes.

Soon, the train slowed to a stop beside an open station. As the two boys got out, they heard a booming voice, “’irst years, firs years, this way. Follow me, all ‘irst years”

They saw a towering man with a great beard gesturing towards himself.

Harry grinned and ran towards him, “Hagrid!” Ron followed more slowly.

The man’s beard moved and crinkles appeared around his eyes, signifying a smile. “Harry, you’re here at last. Oh, ‘ello, Ron. You guys ready for Hogwart’s?”

Harry’s grin widened. Hagrid had been a constant visitor to Potter Manor since Harry could remember. He had a soft spot for the gentle, kind-hearted giant.

As he hugged Hagrid, Harry’s hand encountered a hard lump that seemed to be in one of Hagrid’s pockets.

“Hagrid, what have you got in your pocket?”

Hagrid seemed to frown, from the movement of his beard. "Never you mind, Harry. That's official Hogwart's business. Can't tell you I was at Gringott's today on an errand for Dumbledore. Oops, I shouldn't have said that. Come along now, best move on."

Harry frowned slightly as he followed Hagrid towards what appeared to be a lake and a lot of small boats. He wondered what business would drag Hagrid to Gringott's and why it seemed to be a secret.

Later that night, Harry lay on his new four poster bed, just as big and grand as his bed back in Potter Manor. It had been an interesting night. He remembered the awe he felt when he first saw the castle from the lake. He knew that his companions on the boat, Ron, Hermione Granger and the boy who had lost the frog, Neville Longbottom, had been just as awe-struck.

The sorting had been better than he had imagined, with the sorting done by a beaten-up old wizard's hat. He had been shocked when the hat offered to place him in Slytherin, especially after hearing it place Malfoy in that house. He was glad that he had made it place him in Gryffindor. His Dad would be proud, not to mention Sirius. The Welcoming Feast was brilliant, with the food rivalling anything that had been served at Potter Manor or the Burrow, not that he would say that to his mum or Mrs. Weasley.

He looked around the first year dormitory at the four other beds. Ron was asleep in the bed to his right, snoring like always. His other three roommates were Neville Longbottom, who was a bit pudgy Seamus Finnegan who was Irish and Dean Thomas, a dark-skinned boy. Already, he felt a bond with them, though not yet as deep as he had with Ron.

Yes, he couldn't wait for morning to come so he could see more of Hogwart's.

Chapter 2: Strange goings on

Harry sat in a table in the Gryffindor common room, hunched over a bit of parchment. It was early on a Friday morning and Harry was gathering his thoughts so he could send a letter to his parents about his first two weeks at Hogwarts.

It had been an interesting two weeks. At first, the other students were constantly pointing to and gawking at him, their voices muffled in whispers behind his back. Harry tried to ignore them, pulling his robes tightly around himself and making sure his bangs covered his scar. Luckily, Ron, the twins, and, occasionally, Percy would run interference whenever another student got too close or tried to ask Harry questions. Harry was grateful for his favorite redheads.

Hogwarts was turning out to be even more fascinating and confusing than he had imagined from descriptions of his parents, Sirius, Remus and the older Weasley brothers. The numerous corridors and shifting staircases made finding one's classroom an adventure and made being late a distinct possibility. Luckily, his father and Sirius had taught him as much about the secret passages of Hogwarts that they knew as they could. Using them allowed Harry and Ron to get to their classes on time in spite of being among the last to leave the Great Hall after meals.

There were numerous ghosts in Hogwarts who were more interesting than the ghoul in the attic of the Burrow. There was Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor house ghost whose head was almost completely severed when he was executed for having an affair with a lord's wife. The Blood Baron, the Slytherin house ghost, was the terror of the other ghosts. Worst of all, was Peeves, a mischievous poltergeist who loved to play mean pranks on students.

The classes themselves fascinated and dismayed Harry. He realized that there was still a lot for him to learn in spite of being exposed to the Wizarding world all his life.

The teachers were both encouraging and intimidating like Professor Flitwick, the tiny wizard who taught charms and was head of Ravenclaw House and Professor Sprout, the little dumpy witch who taught Herbology and was head of Hufflepuff House.

The Defense against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Quirrel, was a strange person to be teaching that subject since he stuttered often and seemed easy to intimidate. He even wore a turban which was a gift of gratitude from some African prince he had saved from a zombie.

History of Magic which was taught by a ghost, Professor Binns, was the most boring class of all.

Professor McGonagall, his Head of House, seemed to be a strict and clever witch who deserved respect. She taught Transfiguration and gave them a stern warning about being serious in its study. Their first lesson, transfiguring a match into a sewing needle, was already difficult. At the end of the hour, only Hermione, Harry and Neville Longbottom had managed to make any change in their match. Harry noticed that this seemed to upset the bushy-haired girl.

Harry was surprised on finding out that Neville's parents were Aurors. His father seldom mentioned his co-workers and Harry was so often with the Weasleys that he had never had the time to meet the children of other workers. He thought it a pity since the pudgy boy seemed clever but a bit nervous. Harry resolved to get to know him better.

Potions seemed the worst subject to Harry for two reasons. First, they had it with the Slytherins and second, it was taught by Professor Snape. Harry had been warned by Sirius that the greasy-haired potions master may be hostile to him but never explained why. When the Gryffindor first years had their first potions class, Professor Snape sneered at Harry and tried embarrass Harry by asking him several obscure questions about potion ingredients. Fortunately, having been forced by Lily to study his books for at least two hours a night in the month before going to Hogwarts, Harry was able to answer the questions after thinking hard. Harry noticed that Hermione tried to answer the questions faster but was ignored by Professor Snape, which also dismayed her.

The most interesting and terrifying day for Harry had been the previous day and night. It had started normally with regular classes. But that afternoon, during the first flying lesson with the Slytherins,

the day turned strange. One of the Slytherin boys fell off his broom and broke his wrist, necessitating Madame Hooch, the flying instructor, to bring him to the Hospital Wing, though she gave a stern warning to the rest of the students not to go up alone on pain of expulsion.

While landing, Neville dropped a glass ball called a Rememberall. It had been sent by his mother since he was sometimes forgetful. Malfoy happened to pick it up and refused to return it. When Harry demanded its return, Malfoy took off on his broom and taunted Harry to get it from him. Now Harry, having been flying since his father took him up on his broom when he was not even a year old, was a natural flyer. He immediately zoomed up to Malfoy, in spite of Hermione's warning. Malfoy, in surprise, threw the rememberall as far as he could. Harry rushed after it and caught it just before it smashed into a far wall of the castle. Unfortunately, McGonagall saw Harry and called him out.

However, instead of being expelled, McGonagall introduced Harry to the captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, Oliver Wood as the new seeker. Wood was ecstatic and hoped Harry would help them win the Quidditch Cup. Harry was stunned and ecstatic at this.

That night, dismayed that Harry had not been expelled, Malfoy challenged him to a Wizard's Duel at midnight. Neville and Ron offered to be his seconds. Hermione tried to stop them from leaving Gryffindor Tower but found herself locked out of the Tower when the Fat Lady painting who guarded their entrance had gone wandering off. The four went off to the agreed place of the duel, but Malfoy didn't show up. Instead they were almost caught by the caretaker, Angus Filch, for being out of their dorms after curfew. In fleeing from him, they found a huge three-headed dog behind a locked room and barely made their escape back to their Tower.

Harry decided to leave that last adventure out of his letter. No sense in worrying his parents since he had no intention of going anywhere near that beast again. He wondered why there was a monster like that in a school. Hermione had mentioned that it seemed to be standing on a trapdoor, guarding it.

Harry remembered an article in the Daily Prophet newspaper about a break-in at Gringott's Bank on September 1st, specifically at into a vault that had just been emptied. Hagrid had been at the Gringott's earlier that day and seemed to be hiding something in his pocket. Harry wondered if there was a connection between the mysterious object in Hagrid's pocket, the monstrous dog and the break-in at Gringott's. It seemed just like a case his dad would be interested in.

He added a note to the letter, asking his parents to send his old broom, a Comet 260, so he would have his own broom for use during the Quidditch matches. Once he had finished his letter, he waited for Ron to come down to accompany him to the Owlery so he could use his owl, Hedwig, to deliver the letter to Potter Manor.

That night, during dinner, Hedwig returned together with Artemis, his mother's eagle owl, carrying a long and thin wrapped package between them. There was note attached to Hedwig's leg with *READ THIS FIRST* on it. Harry immediately ripped the note open and recognized his father's untidy scrawl interspaced with his mother's lovely handwriting.

Harry,

Congratulations, son. We are proud of you. I knew you had it in you to make it to the team, though I never dreamed you'd be in it in your first year. Imagine! You're the youngest seeker in a century.

Now, James, control yourself. Harry, we've talked with the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall. We're aren't happy with the way you attracted her attention with your flying skills, young man. Anymore rule breaking and we'll come down there and have a talk with you.

Now, Lils, let the boy have some fun. Merlin knows its boring just studying.

It's fine to have fun, James but not while breaking the rules. Those are meant to keep him safe. Definitely, he can't have fun like you did in our fifth year.

You know I only had fun with those gits who deserved it. Ouch!

James! Language! Harry, you better not pull any pranks while in school. I know the Weasley twins have been trying to convince you to start a new generation of marauders.

How did she find out? Harry wondered. Wait, this is Mum. She knows everything. What was that comment about their fifth year?

Please, Lils. Let me finish this. Okay, son. Now about the broom the owls brought you. We got permission from the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall to sent you this. It isn't your old broom. We thought you deserved something worthy of a seeker. Consider it an early Christmas present. Don't open it until you get to your dormitory

Don't think this is a reward for rule breaking, Harry. Remember, we'll be in touch with your teachers, especially Professor McGonagall, who was our Head of House.

Really, Lils! Okay, Harry. That's it for now. Good Luck. We'll try to be there for your first match.

Love, Mum and Dad.

Harry was stunned and wary. Could it possibly be? There was a certain broomstick he had been eyeing at Quality Quidditch Supplies on Diagon Alley. His mother had told him he wouldn't get a broom like that until at least his thirteenth birthday.

He passed the note to Ron and caressed the wrapped broom, his insides clenched in anticipation. Ron eyes widened as he looked from the note to the broom.

As soon as dinner was done, the two boys were the first to leave the Great Hall. When they were in their dormitory room, Harry jumped to his bed and proceeded to rip off the brown wrapping paper.

A beautiful broomstick was revealed. It was made of mahogany and had a lovely tail of precisely trimmed twigs. On its handle were the words NIMBUS 2000. It was the broom he had been gazing at in the display window of Quality Quidditch Supplies.

Harry was ecstatic and wished he could be outside right now to try it.

“Wicked,” Ron said, grinning, “Now that you have that, there’s no way anyone will beat you in getting the snitch. We’re sure to win the Cup this year.”

The weeks passed in a flurry of classes, homework and practice. Wood was pleased with the level of natural skill Harry possessed. The older boy threw golf balls as fast and as far as he could for Harry to catch and Harry never missed. His new broom was a great help.

Soon it was Halloween. Harry and Ron were looking forward to the Feast after all the twins had told them about it, but it turned into another interesting day.

It started in Charms with Hermione Granger correcting Ron’s pronunciation of the levitation charm’s words. Ron had called her a “nightmare” as they left class. Later, they noted her absence from their next classes and even the Feast. Parvati Patil commented that she was in the girl’s ground floor bathroom, crying.

Then Professor Quirrel had burst in during the Feast screaming about a Troll being in the Dungeon before fainting. As the students were being led back to their dormitories for safety, Harry convinced Ron to find Hermione to warn her about the Troll.

Unfortunately, the Troll found her first. The boys rushed to her defense and ended up with Ron levitating the Troll’s club over its head and knocking it out. The professors were stunned by what happened. The boys were equally stunned when Hermione took responsibility for the incident. That led the two boys to accept her as a friend and their duo became a trio.

A couple of weeks after that, Harry noticed that Professor Snape was limping. A few times, he barely heard him muttering something about “three-headed beast”, “get past it” and “bother changing the dressing”. He wondered whether Snape knew of the huge dog in the third floor corridor and why he would want to get past it.

By the time of Harry’s first Quidditch match, the three were closer than anyone else in their year. Harry and Ron introduced Hermione to Harry’s parents when they came to watch the match. Harry was quite nervous and hoped he wouldn’t disappoint his parents especially his

father. Then in the middle of the match, just as he had seen the snitch, Harry felt his broom lurch and start to buck until he was hanging on to his broom by his fingernails.

Hermione spotted Professor Snape staring at Harry with his lips moving.

“Ron!” she said, grabbing the redhead’s arm, “I think Professor Snape’s cursing Harry’s broom. Look at him, his lips are constantly mouthing words.”

Ron stared at the said teacher. “What, what do we do?”

“It’ll take too long to tell an adult,” she said, “Leave it to me.”

She moved to the back of the bleachers where the teachers were sitting and set fire to Snape’s robes with a spell. This forced him to jump around, bumping several other professors including Professor Quirrel and Professor Sprout.

Harry quickly regained control of his broom. He almost crashed into the ground as his hand grabbed the snitch before the Slytherin seeker even saw it.

His parents rushed over as soon as Madame Hooch blew her whistle to end the match in favor of the Gryffindor team. Harry reassured them that he was fine as his teammates carried him off the field on their shoulders.

Later, after the Gryffindor tower had settled down from celebrating the victory, Ron and Hermione told Harry about Snape.

“Why would he want to do me in?” Harry asked the two.

“I don’t know, Harry,” Hermione answered, “but he has been a bit harsh on you since we started here. I noticed he and your Dad never looked at each other, much less said hello to the other.”

“I noticed that too though he and Mum were civil enough,” Harry said, “I know from Remus that they were all here together in the same year.

There seemed a bit of tension at home whenever Snape was mentioned."

"You think they've got a history together," Ron asked, "After all, your parents, Sirius and Remus were Gryffindors and Snape was most likely in Slytherin."

"Maybe, but that can't explain cursing Harry to fall off his broom," Hermione said, "It's a bit too far just for an old grudge."

"Let's ask Hagrid tomorrow," Harry suggested, "He's been here since before my parents started here. Maybe he knows something."

The next day, which was a Sunday, the trio visited Hagrid in his hut and asked him about Snape and Harry's parents.

"Now, you three leave that be," Hagrid said, "It's not me place to tell. That'd be between Professor Snape and Harry's parents."

"But Hagrid," Harry said, "we think he tried to kill me."

"Nonsense, Harry," Hagrid said, "no teacher here would try to kill a student."

"But, he'd try to get past a three-headed dog," Harry said suddenly.

"Three-headed?" Hagrid said, "Here now, how'd you know about Fluffy?"

"*Fluffy*?" Ron said, surprised, "That thing has a name?"

"Yeah, he's mine." Hagrid said, "Got him from a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year. Dumbledore borrowed him to guard the.."

"The what?" Harry asked.

"Never mind," Hagrid said, forcefully, "That's all top secret."

"But Snape may be trying to *steal* it."

"Nonsense," Hagrid said, "As a Hogwarts teacher, he wouldn't do such a thing."

“Then why did he try to kill Harry?” Hermione said, “It can’t be from a grudge he has against Harry’s Dad.”

“Now you three listen ‘ere. Whatever is between James an’ Snape is their business and it isn’t any reason to kill Harry. I don’t know why Snape would try to do such a thing. Forget about it and forget about Fluffy and whatever it is ‘e’s guarding. That’s between Dumbledore an’ Nicolas Flamel—“

“So this has something to do with a Nicolas Flamel.” Harry said.

Hagrid just glared at them and refused to say anything else.

Chapter 3: Christmas at Potter Manor

In the two weeks leading to the Christmas Holidays, the trio tried to find out who Nicolas Flamel was from books in the library. Unfortunately, since the only time they had was between lessons, they hadn't found anything.

Flamel wasn't in *Modern Magical History*, *Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century* or *Notable Magical Names of Our Time*. There were a lot of books to search from. Even Hermione was getting frustrated.

Harry wondered if any of the books in the library of Potter Manor might help. His mum had hundreds of books, both muggle and wizarding, there, collected over the years. Harry and his sister had often spent as much time there as playing outside in the grounds around the Manor. He mentioned that to Ron and Hermione, who were intrigued by the idea. Hermione even suggested asking his mother but Harry balked as Lily was bound to ask the reason why they were searching for him.

"I don't think that Flamel would be the topic for any homework we have for the holidays, guys" he told the two. And they had quite an amount assigned to them, especially by Snape and McGonagall.

Soon, the start of the Holidays arrived. Harry and Ron said goodbye to Hermione who was going home to spend the holidays with her muggle parents who were both dentists. The boys, along with the twins and Percy, were going to the Burrow. Harry's parents and sister would pick him up from there.

When the five boys arrived at the Burrow, Molly greeted them with her usual bone-breaking hug. She asked Harry if he was recovered from his near mishap in the last Quidditch game. Harry just grinned and thanked her for her concern. He greeted Mr. Weasley and Ginny, who he noticed seemed a bit distracted.

He and Ron moved outside to allow Ron to try Harry's Nimbus 2000. Harry laughed at the aerial stunts Ron tried. Ginny begged him for a go but Ron refused to come down. Finally, Ginny stormed off into the house.

Harry's parents and sister soon arrived, distracting Ginny's attention away from Harry's broom. The Potter elders accepted a dinner invitation from the Weasleys so it was late at night by the time they got home to Potter Manor.

Potter Manor had been the traditional home of the Potter family for generations. Harry had always loved his home. It was a three-floor mansion set in the midst of a two acre estate. The front doors were large double doors set with the Potter family crest on each door which opened into an elegant entry way.

From the entry room, a guest would be led into a large living room with several comfortable couches and fluffy chairs, a large stone fireplace with a marble mantle and a television set in one corner. An set of sliding double doors allowed one entry to the dining room with its lovely wooden dining table with room for up to twenty people. The kitchen was through a swinging door. Opposite the doors to the dining room was another pair of double doors which led to a medium-sized ballroom. The large library was located beyond the ball room. Another set of glass and wood double sliding doors led from the ballroom to a porch that had a good view of the spacious gardens. An elegant marble staircase led from the Ballroom up to the second floor.

The second floor of the manor contained half a dozen bedrooms. At present, only three rooms were in use; the master bedrooms and the two bedrooms of Harry and Rose. There was also a sitting room at the top of the stairs where several comfortable fluffy chairs were located in front of a large television set and state-of-the-art entertainment system.

The third floor contained a large playroom with both magical and muggle games, a potions lab and a duel practice room. The last two rooms were seldom entered by Harry.

For the first few days of the holidays, Ron was kept busy at the Burrow by chores. Harry spent the first day home telling Rose about Hogwarts but the succeeding days, he spent in the library doing his homework, while surreptitiously looking for references to Nicolas Flamel.

Rose was a bit put out over this lack of attention since they used to play a lot together whenever the Weasleys were not with them. To placate her, Harry allowed her to try his Nimbus 2000 as long as their parents were not around and a house elf, of which four worked for the Potters as free elves, was watching her to make sure she stayed below 30 feet.

On Christmas morning, Harry was awakened by his sister enthusiastically jumping on his bed, obviously excited to open her presents. Harry laughed at her bright spirit and followed her down to their living room where a huge Christmas tree stood.

Their parents were already there, seated on the couch by the fireplace. James and Lily greeted their children with big hugs and warm smiles. Harry enjoyed the warmth and joy being with his family brought.

Rose then went to sit beside the pile of presents at the foot of the tree. She handed each present to the owner, all the while piling her own in a neat stack.

Harry, on the other hand, immediately ripped each of his presents open as soon as he got each one. Lily looked disapprovingly at the mess he was creating while James looked on with amusement.

Harry received a wide assortment of candies and sweets from Ron, a book entitled *Catching the elusive: 1001 Seeker strategies* from Hermione, a hand carved wooden flute from Hagrid, a pair of ankle high leather boots from Uncle Remus and a leather jacket with the words *Best seeker in the World* flashing in bright colors on its back from his godfather, Sirius. Harry laughed at this last one and hoped he could wear it to the Burrow.

His parents gave him a dragonhide wand holder while Rose's present was a red baseball cap with a snitch flying around it. Harry hugged his sister in thanks, saying it would go well with the jacket.

Soon, the Potters flooed over to the Burrow where they would have lunch with the Weasleys. Even Bill and Charlie were home on vacation from their jobs in Egypt and Romania, respectively. Sirius

and Remus were also invited. To complete the day, everyone was having Christmas dinner at Potter Manor.

“Any luck, mate, with Flamel?” Ron asked Harry quietly when they were alone, their sisters having gone off together.

“Nope,” Harry replied, “I’ve been through half the books in our library already. Mum’s suspicious already. She caught me looking for him in one of the older books. I told her it was for an assignment for Binns.”

“That should put her off, right?” Ron asked.

“I thought so, too,” Harry replied, “Then I realized two things. One, she’s a Mum and they can usually tell when a secrets being kept from them. And two, Binns only gives homework about Goblin rebellions.”

Ron grimaced, “I guess that would be bad.” Ron knew from his experience over the years of how bad it was to hide things from Mrs. Potter.

After lunch, the boys got together for a pickup Quidditch game. Molly and Lily forced them to allow the girls to play with them.

So, the players were Harry, Ron, Ginny, Rose, Fred, George, Bill and Charlie. They decided to forego one chaser, on beater and the seeker and to divide into two teams by draw. Bill and Charlie were chosen to be captains and the keepers. Bill’s team was composed of Harry and Ron as chasers and Fred as beater. Charlie’s team had Ginny, and Rose as chasers and George as beater. The winning team had to score 100 points.

Harry wasn’t surprised by the flying abilities of the two redheaded girls, but what surprised him was the level of coordination they had in passing the ball, faking and shooting the quaffle toward the hoops. It was only through some fancy flying that Bill managed to block many of their shots.

Twice, Harry had the quaffle tucked under an arm as he raced for a hoop, only to have it knocked loose, first by his sister then by Ginny. Then the girls intercepted several of Ron’s passes to Harry. Even

with Harry's new broom, his team was outscored. The game ended with Charlie's team winning by 100-80.

"I hope you're a better seeker than a chaser, Harry," Ginny laughingly said as she flew around.

"Well, I hope you girls get into Gryffindor next year," Harry said, "I hate to see you on the Quidditch team of another house, especially Slytherin."

"Hey!" both girls cried out in indignation.

Soon the Potters left to make the manor ready for their guests. Dinner was, as usual, delicious and well received. After an evening of singing Christmas carols, their guests departed feeling very satisfied. No one mentioned the three extra places at the table, which had always been empty for the past ten years.

Lily always sent an invitation to her sister, Petunia, her husband Vernon Dursley and their son Dudley, who was the same age as Harry, to spend Christmas Dinner with them. However, they never came or even asked how to get to Potter Manor.

Ever since Death eaters killed Lily and Petunia's parents during Lily's seventh year, Petunia refused to have contact with her younger sister, except for her and James' wedding. Even then, the tension between Vernon and James and the other wizards had been almost unbearable. Yet, Lily tried year after year to reconnect with her only remaining family aside from her husband and children.

Sometimes, Lily wondered what would have happened to her children if she and James had died that night that Voldemort had attacked them. She wondered how her sister would have treated her niece and nephew, who were obviously magical, considering she and Vernon hated anything to do with magic. But, Lily thought, no need to worry about that. After all, her and James' will specifically stated that, if anything happened to her and James, they wanted Sirius to raise their children, with help from Remus. She couldn't imagine any reason for that wish not to be followed.

That night, as Harry was getting ready for bed, his father knocked on the frame of his open door, "Can I come in for a while, son?"

Harry grinned, "Sure, Dad. What's up?" Harry's eyebrows rose in surprise when his Dad closed the door and put up some spells he recognized as locking and privacy charms. He seemed to be holding a package in his hand.

"Now, son," James said, "I have another Christmas gift for you. I'm only giving it to you now because I don't want your mother to know you have it."

Harry's eyebrows went even higher.

James smirked, "Don't worry. It's not anything dangerous. It's just something of mine that can help you get around at Hogwarts without being seen." He handed Harry the package, "Go on, open it."

Harry ripped the plain brown wrapping off, revealing a silvery flowing bundle of cloth that felt strange, like it was made of water.

"What is it, Dad?" he asked James, fascinated with the gleaming material.

James smiled, "It's an invisibility cloak."

Harry's head snapped up to look at his Dad, "A what?"

"An invisibility cloak," James answered, "Go on, Harry, try it on." When Harry had thrown it over his shoulders, James said, "Now look down."

Harry gasped. His feet were gone. He hurried to the full-length mirror in the door of his wardrobe. His head seemed to be floating in midair, the rest of his body gone. He drew the cloak over his head and his reflection promptly vanished.

Harry removed the cloak and launched himself into the arms of a surprised James, "Thanks, Dad. This is great. Now, Filch won't be able to see me."

James chuckled, "Oh no, he won't. I've used this myself many times to evade Hogwarts' esteemed caretaker. Now, Harry, don't let your Mum know you have it. Lily made me promise not to let you know of this cloak until you were done with school. But after finding out from the Weasley twins that you may consider restarting the Marauders, I couldn't help but give you a way to avoid getting caught."

Harry grinned, "Sure, Dad, Mum won't find out from me. I'll keep it hidden at the bottom of my trunk. Can I show it to Ron?"

"Sure, Harry," James said, "But not here. Wait till you get to Hogwarts."

The rest of the holidays passed quickly. Ron was able to come over to Potter Manor daily, though he had to go home before dinner. He was a bit annoyed at times, since Ginny usually came over with him to visit Rose.

Harry noticed this and after a few days asked him, "Ron, you seem a bit put out these days when you come over with Ginny."

"Come on, Harry," Ron replied, "I don't like my little sister tagging along everywhere with me."

"You didn't used to mind before, Ron. We've been doing this for ages now, since we could walk. What's changed?"

Ron raised an eyebrow in puzzlement, "In case you haven't notice, Harry, we're going to Hogwarts now. We're big boys. We can't spend time around little girls anymore, especially little sisters."

"Better not let Rose or Ginny hear you say that, Ron, especially Ginny. You know how her temper is. Good thing she doesn't have a wand yet. She'd probably hex you into next week."

Ron's face flushed which surprised Harry, "Erm, yeah. She's already got a mean left hook."

Harry looked over at his friend, smirking, "It seems you've gotten more than a punch from her."

Ron's face darkened further, "Okay, okay. If you must know, she's more than punched me when she's gotten angry. At least once, as far as we know."

"What do you mean, Ron," Harry asked.

"Well, my mum thinks she's done accidental magic when she's gotten mad," Ron replied, "Once, when I was six, I was teasing her about a beatup old doll she was rather fond of. Yeah, yeah, I know," he said, when Harry frowned, "it's not really like me to bully others. But, hey, she's my little sister and I was young then. Anyway, she was getting red and had started to tear up. Before I knew it, there was a flash and I had these huge bogeys shaped something like bats coming out of my nose and attacking my face. I hollered for mum but it took her hours to get rid of them. Afterwards, she and Dad asked her about it and she said she didn't know what she did but was just so angry at me."

"Wow," Harry said, "looks like she invented a spell all her own. Would be great to use that to hex Malfoy. Imagine, bat-shaped bogeys coming out of his nose."

"Now, that is really an image I'd like to come true," Ron said, "Anyway, let's forget about my sister for a moment." His voice dropped to a whisper and he glanced toward the door of Harry's room, where they were sitting on Harry's bed. "Have you had any luck with Flamel?"

Harry sighed, "Nope. Like I said at Christmas, no mention of him yet. There are so many books here I don't know where to look."

"Yeah," Ron said, "I've seen your library. Makes me wish that Hermione was here."

Harry's eyebrow rose to his hairline.

"Well, she **is** good at research and all that," Ron said quickly, "With the three of us here, we could find him faster. Then, we could really enjoy the holidays."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Harry said, "We could even tell Mum we were just showing her the library. She is kind of obsessed over books."

"You said it. Mental that one when it comes to studying and books," Ron said, "Anyway, how about a game of Exploding snap."

"You're on," Harry said, "After all, we still have a few days left."

The last days of the Christmas holidays passed quicker than Harry realized. It was the night before he was to go back to Hogwarts and he still was unable to locate any mention of Nicolas Flamel. As Harry was finishing packing, he saw his collection of Chocolate Frog cards scattered on top of his bed. Gathering them, he looked at a few, reading the descriptions of the wizards and witches pictured on them. When he got to the card of Dumbledore, his breath caught as he read the text.

Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times.....***and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel.*** Professor Dumbledore

That's it! He thought. He couldn't wait to tell Ron and Hermione. To think, he had spent all that time in the library when the clue he needed was in his room all along.

Chapter 4: The Marauders return and another Quidditch match

When Harry got back to Gryffindor Tower the next afternoon, he told Ron and Hermione about his discovery about Flamel. The bushy-haired girl immediately sprinted for her dormitory room, warning the two boys to just wait for her where they were, in a corner near the fireplace of their common room. The other Gryffindors weren't paying them any attention, engrossed in their own conversations.

She soon reappeared clutching a rather thick and large book, muttering, "I knew he'd be in here somewhere. I checked it out of the library for some light reading material." The book's title was ***The Greatest Names and Discoveries in Alchemy***.

"You call that light?" Ron asked, stunned.

"Now, where did I see it?" She whispered as she frantically flipped the pages of the book. "Ah, here it is. *Nicolas Flamel is the only known maker of the Philosopher's Stone.*"

"The what?" Ron asked.

Harry frowned, "I think I've heard of that."

"Here, you two, read this," Hermione said, pushing the book toward them and the two boys read:

The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Philosopher's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. It will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Philosopher's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

"You see," Hermione said, "This must be what that dog is guarding, Flamel's Philosopher's Stone. Flamel must have known someone

wanted to steal it so he asked Professor Dumbledore to hide it since they're friends.

"With powers like that, turning any metal to gold and keeping a person from dying, no wonder Snape wants it," Harry said, "*Anyone* would want it. He'll either keep it for himself or sell it off to the highest bidder."

"Blimey," Ron said, "If he's that old, no wonder we couldn't find him in the other books."

"So what do we do now?" Hermione asked them.

"We've got to make sure the Stone is safe," Harry said.

"How do we do that?" Ron asked, "We can't just walk up to Dumbledore and say 'Professor, we heard you have the Philosopher's Stone here. What's guarding it besides the three-headed dog?'"

"No, we can't tell him yet, not without proof." Harry said, "I'll think of a way to find out about the stone." Then seeing Fred and George, he added, "In the meantime, I think its time to have a little fun." Raising his voice, he beckoned to the redheaded twins, "Oy, Fred, George, come over here a sec."

The twins came over and stood near the trio, "What is it...", one said, maybe Fred.

"...you want, Harry?" the other completed.

Harry beckoned to them to move closer, "Well, guys," he said to them in a low voice, "I decided to agree to what you asked me that first day on the Express."

The two twins grinned, "Oh, we're so glad..."

"...you have agreed to our proposal, Harry."

Ron also grinned, "That's great, Harry. Just imagine the looks on the teachers' faces when they realize a new group of Marauders is in Hogwarts."

"And just what does that mean?" Hermione said, moving closer to the four boys, "Who are the Marauders?"

"Only the greatest bunch of pranksters..."

"...ever to grace the walls of Hogwarts."

Hermione frowned, "Pranks? Isn't that a little childish?" She looked at Harry, "Won't your parents be mad at you for pranking?"

"Nope, at least not Dad," Harry said, grinning, "He was one of the original four Marauders."

"Yeah," Fred said, "Him along with Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. Um, of course, the fourth one was Peter Pettigrew."

"Forget him," Harry grimaced, "He's no longer part of that group. He can rot in Azkaban for all I care."

"He's the one who betrayed your parents, isn't he?" Hermione asked, then turned pink at the sudden blaze in Harry's eyes, "Sorry, it's stated in your story in *Modern Magical History*."

"That's okay, Hermione," Harry said, struggling to get his temper under control, "We don't like to talk about him or that night much. But now, let's forget it and concentrate on making my Dad and uncles proud."

"Yeah," Ron said, "We have to think up some good pranks, especially on Malfoy or even Snape."

"No!" Hermione said, "You'll get caught. We'll lose house points."

"Don't worry, Hermione," Harry said, smiling again, "I've got a way for us to avoid getting caught."

“What is it, mate?” Ron asked, curious, “Did your Dad teach you some auror stealth spell?”

“Nope,” Harry said, grinning, “even better. He gave me an invisibility cloak.”

“Wicked!” Ron exclaimed, “Those are really rare and expensive. How many people can fit in it?”

“I don’t know yet,” Harry said, “I only tried it on myself. Come on, let’s check.”

He sprinted up to the first year dormitory room, trailed by Ron and the twins. Hermione reluctantly followed them. Luckily, no one else was in the dormitory.

Harry dug into his trunk and carefully pulled out the glittering cloth. The others stared in awe at it as Harry spread it out then threw it over him.

He then pulled Ron into it. Seeing both of them were well covered, he then let Fred join them. Unfortunately, he was too tall and he caused their feet to be exposed.

Fred got out from under the cloak. Harry then pulled a reluctant Hermione in with him and Ron. The cloak just barely fit them.

Harry then handed it to Fred and George who had to scrunch down in order to be completely covered by it.

“All right,” Harry said, “Now we know that at most, it’ll only hold the three of us or you two. That’ll just make us adjust who pulls the prank.”

“I really don’t know about this, Harry,” Hermione said.

“Well, you don’t have to join us if you don’t want to,” Ron said.

Hermione frowned at him.

"Come on, Hermione," Harry said, "Help us. You're quite good at thinking of spells. We need a little more fun. It's just a bit dull with all the studying. I promise, we won't pull any during classes, just at mealtimes or early in the morning."

"Yeah, Hermione," Ron said, "Come on, we can get back at the Slytherins for all their nasty comments."

"We'll just do harmless pranks, nothing hurtful or permanent," Harry said.

Hermione was silent for a while, looking from Harry to Ron to the twins, who had their lost puppy dog looks on their faces. Finally, she said, "Oh, all right. As long as it doesn't interfere with our classes or hurts anyone."

"Yes!" all four boys said, simultaneously.

Over the next weeks, it seemed the Slytherins were plagued by unusual occurrences. First, during one lunch, several of them, including Malfoy and his cronies, were turned into small canaries, returning to their original states after a few minutes. They found out it was due to some strange candies among the sweets at their table.

Then, their shoes started turning into bunny slippers for two full days. A few days later, anyone who used salt on their food developed spots on their bodies, while those who used pepper would sneeze instead of talking.

Finally, the whole house didn't appear at breakfast one day. The rest of the school found out why during joint classes. They were all wearing pink robes and had pink hair. Snape himself was wearing pink robes and had his skin in pink and yellow stripes. He was furious and glared at the Gryffindors. He had his suspects but could not prove it.

Dumbledore, on the other hand, just smiled. His eyes twinkled with mischief as he listened to his potions master complain.

In their common room, the new Marauders laughed and laughed at the result of their pranks. Even Hermione smiled, though she continued to worry and fret about getting caught.

Three weeks after the start of the term, Gryffindor had its next Quidditch match, this time against Hufflepuff. Dumbledore was sitting in his office the night before when his fireplace flared and James Potter's face appeared in it.

"James," Dumbledore said, smiling, "What can I do for you? Nothing wrong at home, I hope?"

"No, professor, nothing's wrong at this end," James replied, agitated, "But, I think I could say something is wrong there."

"What are you talking about, James?" Dumbledore asked, though he had an idea what seemed to be upsetting the older Potter.

"Can I come through to your office?" James asked.

"Of course, James," Dumbledore said, twirling his wand to cast a modification on the anti-apparation wards his office.

James soon appeared in front of his desk. "How could you, Professor? How could you let that man referee a Gryffindor match?" he asked, fury in his voice.

"Now, James. I assume you found out about Severus requesting to referee the next Quidditch match?" Dumbledore asked. He added with a smile, "I hope you didn't find out from Harry."

"No, he didn't tell me," James said, "His friend, Ron, sent an owl to his parents complaining about it. His sister heard about it and told my daughter, who told me."

"Now, James, don't worry about Severus being the referee. He told me he wanted to try it out," Dumbledore said, smiling.

"And you believed him? Come on, professor. He just wants to keep Gryffindor from winning. I bet he calls a lot of fouls against them, even against Harry. You wait and see."

"Now, now, James," Dumbledore began but was interrupted by another face appearing in his fireplace, this time a redheaded woman.

"Professor Dumbledore? Is my husband there?"

"Oh, oh," James said, paling.

Dumbledore turned to the fireplace, mirth in his voice, "Yes, Lily. James is here. We were just discussing the points of having Severus referee in Quidditch.

"James! You promised to leave it alone," Lily almost screamed.

"Lily, come on," James whined, "Think about Harry. He'll be on the pitch. You can't trust Snape to be fair."

"I trust Professor Dumbledore's decision," Lily replied coolly, "Let it go. We'll be there anyway. If you don't come home now, you're sleeping on the couch."

Looking despondent and defeated, James bid goodbye to Dumbledore and flooed back to Potter Manor.

The following day, the weather was beautiful, just right for a Quidditch match. When Harry entered the pitch, he immediately kicked off. As he circled the stadium, he saw his parents there in the stands. He then blinked and almost fell off his broom, for beside them were Rose and Ginny. He groaned. Of all the times for *them* to watch him play, now was not a good time, especially with Snape refereeing.

Then Harry spotted Dumbledore also in the stands, watching. Then to the other side of his parents were Sirius and Remus. He grinned in relief. With his parents, surrogate uncles and Dumbledore there, he wasn't worried about Snape trying anything like in the first match. Now, he only had to overcome his nervousness on doing well.

Soon Snape blew the whistle to start the game as he released the balls. Within thirty seconds, he gave Hufflepuff a penalty when George sent a bludger at him. Luckily, Oliver was able to block the shot. Then, he passed it to Angelina Johnson who tossed it to Katie

Bell. She then streaked off toward the Hufflepuff hoops followed closely by Angelina and Alicia Spinnet.

Harry tore his attention from the chasers and circled the pitch, his eyes searching for the elusive snitch. Suddenly, he spotted it near the ground, just below Snape. He pushed his broom downward and streaked towards it, missing Snape by inches. His hand closed over the snitch just before he would have plowed into the ground. He pulled his broom's handle up and slowed to a stop, raising his hand in triumph.

The Gryffindor section of the crowd roared in jubilation. His teammates moved down and crowded around him. His parents and their friends soon followed. James leaped forward to hug his son.

"Great catch, son," James said, "Really great. Its not even five minutes into the game and no one had scored yet." James grinned at Snape who was off to the side, pale and glowering.

Lily hugged and congratulated her son while Sirius and Remus beamed at him with pride.

"You really showed that git, Harry," Sirius said.

"Sirius!" Lily scolded, "Don't put ideas in his head." She turned to Harry. "Don't think too badly of Severus, Harry. He's not as bad as your father and these two say."

Harry said nothing. He was inclined to agree with his father and uncles, but didn't want to get on the bad side of his mother. He instead turned to his sister and her best friend.

"So, guys, what do you think of my Quidditch skills now?" Harry asked the two redheads.

Rose tilted her head, "Not bad, big brother. However, I spotted that thing a few seconds before you did. Wait until next year and I may try and convince your captain to let me try out for Seeker." Ginny giggled beside her. Harry gaped at Rose then turned away, shaking his head in disgust. It didn't help that his parents and surrogate uncles also found it amusing.

Chapter 5 : More mysteries at Hogwarts

That night, still feeling elated despite his sister's pun, Harry decided to celebrate by pranking the Slytherins again. Deciding that this was personal, he didn't tell any of the other new Marauders.

He slipped out of bed after midnight and donned his invisibility cloak. He ignored the portrait of the Fat Lady as he exited Gryffindor Tower and moved silently towards the dungeons.

When he was on the first floor of the castle, he heard footsteps approaching and moved to the side of the corridor. He saw the figure of Snape walking slowly, constantly looking around as if he was making sure no one was following him. Curious, Harry carefully followed the potions master.

Seeing Snape enter an empty classroom, Harry was just able to slip in before he closed the door. In the room was a nervous looking Professor Quirrell.

"Severus, I-I d-d-don't know why y-y-you want t-to meet at this time of night," Quirrell inquired of his colleague.

"I'd think we would want some privacy," Snape said in an icy tone, "After all, the students don't know about the Philosopher's Stone being hidden here."

"W-w-why are we discussing it?" Quirrell asked.

"I'd like to know if you've already found a way to get by that blasted beast of Hagrid's."

"B-b-but, Severus, I wouldn't..."

"Now, you don't want to make me an enemy, Quirinius," Snape said, closing the distance between him and Quirrell.

"I-I don't know w-w-what you mean..."

"I think you do." His voice then lowered and Harry had to move closer and just caught the words, "- your little bit of hocus pocus. I'm waiting."

"Y-y-you know I c-c-can't..."

"Very well, Quirinius," Snape interrupted, "We'll have another talk very soon after you've had a while to think and consider where your loyalties lie."

Snape opened the classroom door, peered out and then stalked away. Harry followed him out. Turning, he saw Quirrell through the open door, just standing there and looking petrified. Harry, seeing that Snape was headed back to the Dungeons, decided to go back to Gryffindor Tower, his prank forgotten.

The next morning, Harry pulled Ron and Hermione over to a corner of the Gryffindor common room. He told them what he had witnessed the night before.

"So, you see, we were right. The Philosopher's Stone is here, being guarded by Fluffy. Snape's trying to get Quirrell to help him steal it. From that bit about Quirrell's hocus-pocus, I'd say there are other things protecting it. It makes sense Dumbledore would get the other professors to help. Snape wanted Quirrell to tell him how to get past his bit."

"You mean the Stone is safe only so long as Quirrell stand up to Snape?" Hermione said, alarmed.

"Bloody hell, it'll be gone day after tomorrow." Ron said.

"Ronald! Language," Hermione chided.

Over the next few weeks, the trio saw Quirrell get paler and thinner, but Snape seemed to be in a foul mood, so they assumed the DADA teacher hadn't cracked yet. They soon had other things to worry about as their teachers continued to pile homework on them as the term progressed.

Hermione was constantly pushing the two boys to study, much to their annoyance, especially Ron. They were constantly in the library and getting as stressed out as she was. Then, one afternoon while they were researching for an assignment in Potions, Ron noticed Hagrid in the library, looking at some books. When they asked him about his presence there, he evaded the question and asked if they were still looking for references on Nicolas Flamel.

Ron set him straight on that but blurted out that they knew what Fluffy was guarding. Hagrid told them to keep quiet and invited them to his hut later to see something he had. Ron discovered that Hagrid had been looking at books on dragons.

“Oh,” Harry said, “You know, since I was little, Hagrid’s often mentioned that he’d always wanted a dragon.”

“You don’t think...” Hermione said.

“I sure hope not.” Ron said, “I’ve had all the stories from Charlie about dragons and raising them. He’s my older brother who works with them in Romania.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, “I remember one time a few years back, your mum went ballistic about some burns he received. I think it was his first year working there.”

Later that afternoon, the trio got to Hagrid’s hut. Upon entering, they noticed that it was quite warm inside. They had tea but politely refused the rock cakes Hagrid offered.

“Hagrid,” Harry said, “we were wondering what other defenses the Stone had to protect it from being stolen.”

Hagrid frowned, “You three know I can’t tell ye that. See, number one, I don’ know meself what they are. Number two, yeh know too much already. I don’ even know how yeh found out abou’ Fluffy. Just know that it’s safe here, at leas’ safer than it was at Gringotts.”

“Come on, Hagrid,” Hermione said, in a warm, flattering voice, “We just wanted to ask you since you know about everything that goes on

around here. All we want to know is who Dumbledore trusts to help him protect the Stone.”

“Well, all righ’,” Hagrid said reluctantly, “Guess no harm in yeh knowin’ that. Okay—let’s see—yeh know about Fluffy, course, Dumbledore’s done sumthin’...then some o’ the other teachers did some enchantments....Professor Sprout – Professor Flitwick –“ he ticked them off on his fingers, “Professor McGonagall – Professor Quirrell, and oh, yeah, Professor Snape.”

“What!” Harry said, “Snape?”

“Yeah, yeh aren’ still on tha’, are yeh? He’s not tryin’ ta still the Stone, he’s helpin’ ta protect it.”

“Hagrid,” Harry then asked, “you’re the only one who knows how to get past Fluffy, right?”

“Oh yeah, jus’ me and Professor Dumbledore,” Hagrid said, “Yep, no one else.”

Just then, Harry spotted something in the large fireplace that drove all thoughts of the Stone from his mind.

“Hagrid,” Harry said, “Tell me that that’s not what I think it is in the fire.”

Hagrid grinned. “Yup, it is.”

It was a large black egg, a dragon egg.

“Blimey,” Ron said, “Where did you get a dragon’s egg. They’re a protected species. Breeding them in Britain is considered illegal.

Hagrid bristled, “Won it, fair an’ square, las’ night in the pub in the village from a stranger in a game of cards.” He showed them a book entitled *Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit*. “Got this outta the library and been followin’ it. Even told me what kind of egg it is. That there is a Norwegian Ridgeback, it’s a rare one. Should hatch real soon. I’ll let yeh know when it does.”

The three friends exchanged looks of concern, but they knew they couldn't talk any sense into Hagrid right now. They'll have to wait until the dragon hatched.

A few days later, they received a note from Hagrid that the blessed/dreaded event was very near. The three hurried down to his hut during dinnertime, arriving in time to watch the egg hatch.

It proved quite feisty and already breathed fire. Hagrid named it 'Norbert'.

Unfortunately, Hagrid caught sight of Malfoy's face in his window that day. Strangely, the Slytherin didn't seem to make a move to inform his Head of House or Dumbledore about the illegal creature in Hagrid's hut. The trio finally convinced him to send it away. Ron owed his brother Charlie about it using his brown barn owl, Barny, which he had received as a Christmas gift from his parents. The owl had been named by his sister, Ginny.

Charlie soon replied and agreed to take the dragon off of them. He arranged for some friends to take the dragon from the Astronomy Tower.

Two weeks after he had been born, Hagrid regretfully packed Norbert up in a crate. Harry, Ron and Hermione used Harry's invisibility cloak to hide them and the crate. They managed to slip past Filch who was busy restraining Malfoy. The pale Slytherin kept insisting the three Gryffindors were also out late.

When they got to the Astronomy Tower, they only had to wait a short while for Charlie's friends. They soon descended the stairs to return to Gryffindor Tower, only to run into Professor McGonagall. Harry had pocketed his cloak when they had arrived at the tower and they forgot all about it.

Needless to say, McGonagall was very upset that three students from her house were out after curfew. She docked them 50 points each and promised a detention for them and Malfoy. The trio were devastated over that.

When the rest of the House found out, they were practically ostracized except for the twins, who merely grinned at them. The Slytherins practically gloated since the loss had placed Gryffindor at last place for the House Cup while Slytherin came up to first, in spite of Malfoy's own points loss.

Harry was particularly devastated. Two days after that night, he saw a familiar eagle owl drop a red colored envelope in front of him.

Oh no! It's Newton, Mum's owl. Is that a howler?

Gingerly, he picked up the envelope and ran out of the Great Hall, the Slytherin's laughter and catcalls ringing in his ear.

When he got outside, the envelope was starting to smoke. He pulled the ribbon quickly off the letter. Immediately, Lily Potter's voice echoed around the grounds.

HARRY JAMES POTTER! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? Even your father never lost that many points in one go. A DRAGON! Of all the things to get involved with! You could have gotten hurt! Weren't the stories of Charlie Weasley enough to teach you not to mess with them?

Now, Lily, calm down. Harry just did what he thought best. He didn't want Hagrid to get in trouble.

But, James...

You know how Hagrid can get carried away with less than acceptable pets. You also know how much Harry cares for Hagrid. He's like an unofficial uncle or godfather to Harry.

Oh, all right. Harry, we're disappointed in you for breaking the rules and putting yourself in such danger. But, we are pleased with your motive. I also heard about some pranks on the Slytherin, though the teachers aren't sure who did them. With your father and his friends being who they are, I have an idea who did. So, let me make myself clear, young man, stick to your books. No more pranks and no more endangering yourself. If you find a similar situation, tell Professor

Dumbledore. He's quite understanding. Be safe and we'll see you in June at the platform.

Okay, Harry, in spite of what your mother said, just enjoy yourself. I'm sorry but with work starting to pile up, we won't be able to attend your next games. Good luck. Don't you dare try to resign from the team over this. Don't mind the Slytherins. Never mind about the House Cup. It's not that important...

James!

Now, Lily, you know that it's just a silly exercise. Anyway, take care, Son. See you soon.

Okay, Harry, take care.

Harry had mixed emotions over this howler/letter. He didn't want to disappoint his parents, especially his dad. His mum was right, Harry resolved to hunker down to his studies and leave off pranks and meddling.

A few weeks later, one Friday morning, he, Ron and Hermione received a note that their detention would be that night. Looking over at the Slytherin table, Harry saw a scowl on the face of Malfoy as he read a similar note. Harry hoped the detention wouldn't be too difficult since he didn't want to spend much time with Malfoy.

That night, the three Gryffindors and Malfoy met with Filch who took them out to Hagrid. Hagrid explained that they were going to look for a wounded unicorn. Harry wondered who would dare harm such a pure and gentle creature.

Hagrid took them into the Forbidden Forest and showed them a pool of silvery unicorn blood. They ran into two centaurs who didn't answer Hagrid's inquiries about any strange going on in the Forest except to say that "Mars was unusually bright tonight".

Hagrid split them into two groups to make the search easier and faster. At Malfoy's insistence, Hagrid's boarhound, Fang went with him and Harry while Hagrid took Ron and Hermione with him.

After an hour, Harry and Malfoy were having difficulty following the path as it wound deeper and deeper into the forest. Suddenly, Harry saw the silvery white body of a unicorn. Before they could approach it, a shadowy cloaked figure seemed to glide down to it and started to drink its blood.

Malfoy screamed and ran off, followed by Fang. Harry stood rooted to the spot then dropped to his knees as the lightning scar on his forehead burst into pain. The cloaked figure started moving towards Harry.

Then, with a clatter of hooves, another centaur burst into the area and drove the figure away. The centaur knew who Harry was. He introduced himself as Firenze and placed Harry on his back, heading for the forest edge.

Suddenly, Firenze turned his head to look at Harry, "Harry Potter, do you know what unicorn blood is used for?"

"No," Harry replied, "We only use the horn and tail hair in potions. I've never heard of unicorn blood being used."

"To obtain the blood, one would need to kill the unicorn and that is a monstrous thing," Firenze said, "It is a hideous crime, committed only by someone who has nothing to lose but everything to gain. For unicorn blood will keep you alive, even if you are but an inch from death, but at a terrible price. To slay such a wondrous and innocent creature and drink its blood causes one to have a cursed life, a half-life from the moment the blood touches one's lips."

"Who could be that desperate?" Harry asked, "I'd have thought death would be preferable to such a state."

"Yes," Firenze said, "Yet, one can be that desperate if it would keep you alive long enough to get something that will return to one to full strength and power, especially if that also made one incapable to dying. Do you know, Harry Potter, what is hidden in your school at the moment?"

"Of course, the Philosopher's Stone, which can be used to produce the Elixir of Life. But, who would want..."

“Can you not think of anyone who would do anything to return and to live again?”

Harry felt a sudden rush of fear and cold. His parents didn't talk much about the night he had gotten his scar. All Harry knew about it was from some books and he had never been too curious of what had really happened to Voldemort since he wanted to distance himself from the fame. Hagrid had told him once that he had simply disappeared and he believed that Voldemort wasn't really dead.

“You don't think that Voldemort...”

Just then, Hagrid arrived with Ron and Hermione and Firenze said goodbye. When they got back to the common room, Harry told his two friends what had happened and what Firenze had insinuated. He was still shaken by the implications.

“All this time, we thought Snape wanted to steal it all for himself,” Harry said, “to sell it to someone else. We never thought he'd steal it for Voldemort.” He ignored the shudder that went through Ron at the mention of his name.

“Yeah, we never thought of that possibility,” Harry said raving, “did you notice tonight that Snape seemed happier and Quirrell just wasn't talking. He must have caved in to Snape. All Snape needs to do is find out how to get past Fluffy, then he can give the Stone to Voldemort.”

“Harry, please stop saying that name,” Ron whispered fervently, his face pale.

“Yeah, all I have to wait for now is for Snape to steal the Stone,” Harry went on, “then Voldemort can finish me off like he was going to do ten years ago.”

“Harry,” Hermione said, looking frightened, “People have said that the only wizard You-Know-Who fears is Dumbledore and he's here at Hogwarts. As long as Dumbledore is here, You-Know-Who wouldn't dare come here, looking for you. You're safe as long as Dumbledore is here.”

Harry took some comfort in those words. He wanted to owl his parents but was afraid that they would pull him out of Hogwarts. He had come to love the school and he didn't want to leave his friends. He decided that as long as Dumbledore was there, he didn't need to worry about Voldemort.

Soon, exams took all thoughts of Voldemort and the Stone from their heads. They proved to be both harder and easier than they had imagined. The stress was so bad that even Hermione breathed a sigh of relief when the last exam ended on Friday. The three headed down to the Entrance Hall with Ron narrating how he would spend the next few days of relaxation.

Harry, on the other hand, still had a problem. His scar had been aching since exams started. He had thought it was due to the stress. Yet, even with them over, the scar was still throbbing. He mentioned it to his two friends. Hermione had suggested he go to the school nurse but Harry insisted that it might be a warning sign of danger.

"Danger?" Ron asked, "Relax, Harry. What possible danger could there be, with Dumbledore around. I mean, we never had proof that Snape found a way around Fluffy. He nearly lost a leg that one time. Malfoy'll be singing praises to Gryffindor before Hagrid lets Dumbledore down."

Harry suddenly realized something and headed off, the two running to catch up. He slowed down only when they arrived at Hagrid's Hut. Hagrid was sitting on the front steps, whittling on a piece of wood.

"Hey yeh three," Hagrid called, "Exams all done? How about some tea?"

"Not right now, Hagrid," Harry asked, sitting down next to him, "We need to ask you something. That night you got the dragon egg, did you recognize the man who you won it from?"

"Well, Harry," Hagrid said, "I dunno, he wouldn't take his cloak off." He raised his eyebrows at their stunned looks, "Look, yeh get lots of odd folk at the Hog's Head pub all the time. Never saw his face, as he had his hood up."

“Did he seem interested in your work? Did he ask about Hogwarts?”

“Well, I think it came up,” Hagrid said, his face screwing up as he tried to remember, “I’m not sure cause he kept buyin’ me drinks....Yeah, he asked what I did an’ I tol’ him I was gamekeeper here....then we talked about the sorta creatures I cared fer....then I hap’ned to mention I’d always wanted a dragon.....then, then he said he had a dragon egg on him an’ we could play cards fer it....but he had ta know if I could take care of it, he didn’t wanta send it to just anyone. So I told him after Fluffy, a dragon would be easy...then he asked me how much trouble Fluffy was. So I told him that Fluffy’s a piece a cake if yeh know how to calm him down, jus’ play a bit o’ music and he falls right to sleep--”

Hagrid then looks horrified, “Forget I said that. Hey, where yeh goin’?”

Harry, Ron and Hermione tore off running back to the castle.

“We’ve got to find Dumbledore.” Harry said, “Come on, my Dad told me where to find his office.”

Soon, they came to the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the Headmaster’s office. As they were figuring out how to get around it, they heard a voice call out, “What are you three doing there?”

They turned around to find Professor McGonagall coming towards them, several books in her arms.

“Professor, we’ve got to see the Headmaster.” Hermione said.

“Whatever for, Miss Granger?” she said, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“We just do, Professor. It’s very important.” Harry said.

McGonagall’s nostrils flared, “Well, whatever the reason, it’ll have to wait. The headmaster isn’t here right now. He received an urgent owl from the Ministry in London just a half-hour ago. He left immediately by broom.”

“What! He can’t have left.” Harry cried, getting agitated, “Professor, tell him to come back. It’s about the Philosopher’s Stone. We think it’ll be stolen tonight.”

McGonagall dropped the books in her arms in surprise, then said, “How did you find out about that? What do you mean, stolen?”

“Please, Professor,” Hermione pleaded, “We have to call Dumbledore back.”

McGonagall looked at them for a while with suspicion replacing her shock. Finally, she said, “Professor Dumbledore will be back tomorrow. I don’t know how you found out about the Stone, but, rest assured it’s too well protected.”

“But, Professor—“

“That’s my final word, Potter, Weasley, Miss Granger. Leave the matter to your elders. Now, go outside and enjoy the weather.”

Instead of going outside, the three headed back to the Entrance Hall. They ran into Snape who looked suspiciously at them, commenting that Gryffindors shouldn’t waste such good sunshine by being indoors.

When they were back in the empty common room, Harry turned to the other two.

“It’ll happen tonight. With Dumbledore gone, Snape will have the best chance to get the Stone for Voldemort tonight.” Harry ignored Ron’s shudders.

“What are we going to do?” Hermione asked.

Harry looked thoughtful, then said, “That’s it then. I’m going out there tonight. I’m going to get the Stone before Snape does.”

“Harry, you can’t do that.” Hermione said, “They might expel you.”

“It doesn’t matter, Hermione.” Harry said, “Don’t you understand? If Voldemort gets his hands on the Stone from Snape, he’ll be whole again, even immortal. You don’t know what it was like when he was

trying to take over. I've heard the stories from Sirius and Remus, even overheard my parents a couple of times talking about it. It was very bad. It'll be like that again. There won't be a Hogwarts to get expelled from. The House cup, Quidditch, all that won't matter to him. He's going to come around and try to finish what he started. He's tried to kill me once. He may even try to kill my family. The Potters have always fought the Dark side. He can't allow us to live. I won't let him try to murder us like he did so many people back then. Not if I can help it. I'm sure my Dad would understand."

"You're right, Harry," Ron said, pale, "My family's the same. They'll never give in to You-Know-Who. He'll try to kill them, too. I'm going with you."

"You two are crazy," Hermione said, staring at the two boys, "Crazy but so brave. All right, I'm going with you two. You may need someone with brains to see you through this."

"Hey!" Ron said.

Harry smiled, "All right, together then, all for one and one for all, like the three musketeers."

Ron groaned, "Didn't they all die?"

Chapter 6: After saving the Stone

Harry blearily opened his eyes. He couldn't see very well since his glasses were not on his face. A blurred figure seemed to hover above him. Then Harry felt his glasses being placed on his nose and the image sharpened into the face of Professor Dumbledore.

Suddenly, Harry remembered everything. He, Ron and Hermione had been confronted by Neville Longbottom, leaving the Gryffindor common room after curfew. Unexpectedly, he had insisted on going with them to help them. Four people were a tight fit for Harry's invisibility cloak; fortunately, they didn't meet anyone in the corridors.

They had found Fluffy already asleep and managed to go down the trapdoor without waking him, landing right on top of some kind of vines. Neville told them it was Devil's Snare and explained how to destroy it before it strangled them.

Neville proved quite helpful after that, helping the trio chase down a flying key to open the next door and aiding Ron in chess strategy needed for them to beat a lifesized game of Wizard's Chess. However, both he and Ron were injured, forcing Harry and Hermione to leave them.

Hermione used logic to figure out a puzzle involving some potions get past some black flames into the next room. Unfortunately, potion dose was only enough for one person so Harry sent her back to take the other two boys to the hospital wing and send an owl to Dumbledore.

Harry was surprised to find not Snape in the next room but Quirrell, who was no longer stuttering and inept. He quickly binded Harry and then turned his attention to a large ornate mirror in the room. Harry read some strange words that made better sense read backwards. He then realized that it was the Mirror of Erised, from a description he had seen and read in a book in the Potter Manor library.

When Quirrell tried to use Harry to find the Stone in the mirror, Harry was surprised to see his reflection pull it out of its pocket, then discovered it was in *his own pocket*. Quirrell then revealed to Harry

what was under his turban – Voldemort himself, attached to the back to Quirrell's head like some ugly parasite.

Voldemort tried to get Harry to give him the Stone, but Harry saw through his lies and realized this man had tried to kill him as a baby and would not hesitate to do so. Voldemort tried to get Quirrell to grab Harry and take the Stone but Quirrell burned himself on touching Harry's bare skin.

Harry then managed to throw Quirrell off and use his wand to throw a spell at Quirrell, a spell he dimly remembered Voldemort throwing at his mother that night he tried to kill Harry – the Expelliarmus spell. Quirrell's skull cracked on contact with the stone wall and Voldemort sped away like a ghost, vowing to return. The last thing Harry remembered was growing weak and sleepy.

Now, Harry had only one thing on his mind, "Professor!" he said to Dumbledore, "The Philosopher's Stone! Quirrell tried to get it. What happened to it?"

"Calm down, my boy." Dumbledore said, "Don't worry. It's no longer a problem."

"But, sir..."

"Relax, Harry, please," Dumbledore said, "otherwise, Madame Pomfrey will throw me out."

Harry now had a good look around. He was lying on a bed with white linen sheets, in a room full of similar beds. He realized that this must be the hospital wing.

"Now, I will answer your questions before I summon your family, who are quite concerned for you," Dumbledore said, "In fact, they only just left to get a spot of dinner."

Harry then felt sick. *His parents! Everything must have taken place earlier than just last night for them to be at Hogwarts already. What would they say, putting himself in such danger.* He turned to the headmaster again.

"Sir, how long have I been lying here?" he asked Dumbledore. "How are Ron and Neville?"

"You've been here three days already, Harry, Your friends, Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom are quite all right but have been worried about you."

"But, sir, what about the Stone? Quirrell wanted it for You-Know-Who."

"Ah, the Stone," Dumbledore was silent for a while, "Be reassured that neither Professor Quirrell nor Voldemort got the Stone. When I got there, I was in time to see the shade of Voldemort fleeing the room. I would have chased after him but I was more concerned for you. As for the Stone, it has been destroyed."

"But if the Stone has been destroyed, what will happen to Nicolas Flamel and his wife? Won't they die?"

"I'm afraid so. Nicolas and I had a talk and agreed it would be best to destroy the Stone, lest Voldemort or someone else make another attempt to get it. But, they reassured me that they had enough Elixir of Life to allow them to set their affairs into order." Dumbledore smiled at the look of amazement and concern on Harry's face, "Do not worry, Harry. They have lived a long and wonderful life together. The love they share will carry them on for death is but another adventure."

Harry lay back, pondering what Dumbledore had said. Dumbledore just sat there, admiring the ceiling as he hummed some tune.

"Professor," Harry said at last, "I was thinking, now that the Stone is gone, does that mean that Vol- Volde-, I mean You-Know-Who...."

"Say his name, Harry," Dumbledore said kindly, "Fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, "Without the Stone, will Voldemort ever come back? I mean, he's not gone, is he?"

"No, Harry," Dumbledore said sadly, "I'm afraid he's still out there somewhere, perhaps trying to get another body...but, not being truly

alive, he can't truly be killed. Even then, you have delayed his return to power. There are other ways he may return to his original state and there are other followers beside Quirrell who may try to help him. But, if he is constantly delayed or thwarted, then he may never return to power."

"Professor," Harry said, "Why is it that Quirrell couldn't bear to touch me? The mere contact with my skin burned him."

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore said, "Well, Harry, when Professor Quirrell started drinking unicorn blood to keep Voldemort alive, he became as evil and monstrous as Voldemort. You have on you a mark granted by your mother when she tried stand between you and Voldemort."

Harry's hand went to his forehead to touch his scar.

"No, not that scar or any physical mark," Dumbledore continued, "but a mark of love within your very skin. Something as pure and good as love cannot be understood by Voldemort so it caused him agony to touch something marked by it."

Harry smiled at his words. He had always felt that love from his family. Dumbledore looked kindly at him, a twinkle in his eyes.

"One last thing, Professor," Harry said, "How did I get the Stone out of the mirror. I've heard of it before. I read somewhere that it lets you see your deepest desires. Yet, the most contented man will only see himself."

"Ah, yes, the mirror," Dumbledore smiled, "That's one of my more ingenious ideas, if I say so myself. You see, only someone who wanted to find the Stone, find it and not use it, would be able to."

"Now, I believe those very people who love you are here."

Just then, the doors of the hospital wing burst open and several people came hurrying in. Harry looked up and groaned at the sight of his mother and father bearing down on him.

“HARRY JAMES POTTER!” Few things could match his mother in full fury. Strangely, among those that did were his sister, Molly Weasley and Ginny Weasley. Redheads!

An hour later, Lily had calmed down enough to allow her son to explain things. Luckily, Madame Pomfrey allowed Ron and Hermione to visit Harry soon after his parents had arrived and they helped him narrate all that had occurred. The older Potters told Harry that they had left Rose with the Weasleys but had owed her that her brother was fine.

James smiled down at his son as he sat beside him, “Great work, Son. I’m proud of you. You threw a real great spell, more powerful than many of my colleagues. You’ll make a great auror someday.” Harry beamed at the praise. He had always been afraid he wouldn’t match up to his father, in spite of the Boy-Who-Lived title.

“James!” Lily chided from the other side of Harry, “Don’t encourage the boy. It’s bad enough he lied to me when he was researching about Flamel, but he went up against Vol-, Vol-, Voldemort.”

Harry looked at his mother with admiration. All these years, she always used “You-know-who” when referring to Voldemort. A healer trained in muggle psychiatry techniques had attributed it to trauma from the attack.

“Well, Lily,” James retorted, “call it payback for what he tried to do to Harry all those years ago. I’m just sorry he’s still around.”

“Dad, Mum” Harry said quietly, “I was wondering just now. It seemed Voldemort went to a lot of trouble then. I mean, using Peter and all, just to find us and try to kill me. I mean, I was just a year old then. What threat could I be to him?”

Harry couldn’t miss the looks exchanged by his parents.

“Now, Harry,” his father said, “you know we were strong opponents of him and his followers. He was going around killing any enemies. Since I come from an ancient line of Purebloods and your mother is muggleborn, it’s natural for him to target us. He just tried to kill you first to torture us.”

“Don’t concern yourself over it, Harry,” his mother added, “Whatever reason he had to try to kill you, it doesn’t matter since he’ll never have a chance to try again.”

Harry could sense that they seemed to be hiding something but since he was still a bit tired, he let it drop for now.

Soon, Madame Pomfrey came in and told his parents and friends that they had to let Harry rest some more. Harry soon drifted off to sleep.

After seeing Ron and Hermione to Gryffindor Tower, James and Lily joined Dumbledore in his office.

As soon as the door closed, James stomped up to Dumbledore who was seated behind his desk, “Really, Headmaster. This has gone too far.”

“James, please calm down,” Lily said.

“No, Lily,” James said, “I have to get this off my chest. In spite of what I told Harry, I was dismayed and shocked by what happened. I know you also were scared by this, but you took it out on our son. But the ultimate responsibility for this rests with the headmaster.”

“I’m afraid he’s right, Lily” Dumbledore said, “Please, sit down, both of you.”

Dumbledore conjured two cushioned chairs in front of his desk and the elder Potters sat down on them.

“All right, then, professor” Lily said, fixing him with a glare that often frightened her husband and children, “What were you thinking when you placed the Stone here? Then, there’s that three-headed dog of Hagrid’s. How could you hide them in a school?”

“Please, understand, Lily, James,” Dumbledore said, “At the time, we weren’t sure who was trying to steal the Stone. Being a good friend of Nicolas, I offered to keep it for safekeeping. I reasoned at the time that no one would think to look for it in a school.”

“Unfortunately, you didn’t count on Quirrell,” James said.

Dumbledore sighed, "Yes, I had no idea he had gone so far into the dark, let alone become a supporter of Voldemort. In asking the help of my fellow teachers, I let him know where the Stone was. Fortunately, your son has once again stopped him."

The three adults were silent for a few minutes. Then, Lily said, "Professor,"

"Please, my dear," Dumbledore interrupted, "You two can call me Albus. It's been more than ten years since I was your professor."

"All right, Albus," Lily amended, blushing a bit, "Harry expressed curiosity as to why Voldemort had tried to kill him ten years ago."

"We managed to give him excuses, Albus," James said, "but eventually, I think we may have to tell him about the prophecy."

"James, no!" Lily said.

"He has to know, Lily," James said, "He's got a right to know. It's his life and this concerns him."

"But he's still too young," Lily said, tears forming in her eyes.

James moved to her, kneeling in front of her and cradling her in his arms. "I know what you're thinking, love. I'm his father. I want to spare him from this as much as you. But it's something he'll have to face someday. It's best he be prepared. That way, he'll have the best chance to survive and go on with his life."

Dumbledore sighed, "I understand James' concern, Lily. With this reappearance of Voldemort, we must assume that the prophecy will be fulfilled in the next few years. We have to prepare Harry for that. However," he held up his hand to forestall any angry comment from the redheaded woman, "we will do it slowly so as not to arouse his suspicion. For now, we will not let him know of the prophecy. Maybe by his fifteenth birthday, it would be right."

James and Lily agreed reluctantly to Dumbledore's idea. Specifics could be worked out later. The couple thanked Dumbledore and went to the guest quarters in the teachers' wing where they had been

staying since they got word of what had happened to their son. They hoped he would be better.

The next morning, the nurse ran her wand over Harry and proclaimed him fit enough to leave the hospital wing that night, in time for the Leaving Feast. His parents spent an hour visiting him before hugging him goodbye, promising to meet him when the Express came in to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$.

When he went out the door of the hospital wing, he was surprised to find Ron, Hermione and Neville waiting for him.

"Hi, guys," he said to them, "Glad you came to get me."

Neville grinned, "That's all right. Quite an adventure we had, eh?"

Harry grinned back, as did Ron.

"Boys!" Hermione said, indignant, before breaking out into a little smile of her own.

The four Gryffindors walked down towards the Great Hall.

"Say, Neville," Harry said, "That was quite a good bit of flying you did. I know Ron is quite good, but, frankly, I was surprised you were that good."

"Thanks, Harry," Neville said, "My Dad and I fly around Longbottom Mansion's grounds once in a while."

"Do you play Quidditch?" Ron asked.

"Well, Dad was a chaser on the Ravenclaw team for his last three years here. We often toss the quaffle between us, but never had enough people to play."

"Well," Harry said, "Why don't you come over to Potter Manor or the Burrow this summer. It's too bad I never got to know the kids of my dad's co-workers, but I think its time I did."

Neville grinned. "Sure, be glad to."

Harry turned to Hermione, "Maybe we can get Mum to let you come too, Hermione. As our friend, Ron and I'd like you to get to know our families."

"Yeah," Ron said, "especially our sisters. Quite a pair, those two are. May be good for them to have an older sister to control them." Ron failed to see the scowl form on Hermione's face.

"Well," Hermione said, "my parents are taking me to France for two weeks. But, we'll be back by the end of July. So, maybe I can visit you then."

"Great," Harry said, "just in time for my birthday."

By now, the four Gryffindors had arrived at the Great Halls doors and entered to enjoy the end-of-term feast. By the end of the evening, Harry thought it was one of his best evenings.

Initially, the Hall had been decked in Slytherin colors of green and silver since Slytherin had won the House Cup for the seventh year in a row. Then, Dumbledore had awarded some last minute points to Gryffindor for the events of the Stone. Forty points had been awarded each to Neville, Ron and Hermione and fifty had been awarded to Harry for "outstanding courage and loyalty to the Light". So, Gryffindor ended up beating Slytherin by two points for the House Cup.

With a wave of Dumbledore's hand, the green and silver were replaced by Gryffindor red and gold and the huge banner behind him changed to that bearing the proud Gryffindor lion amidst thunderous applause from all except the Slytherins. The four Gryffindors were repeatedly congratulated by their house mates.

Harry had looked at the High Table to see Hagrid beaming at him and Snape stiffly shaking McGonagall's hand, a false smile plastered on his face. The potions master turned to his direction and from the look on his face, Harry was sure his next year in potions would not be good.

Harry didn't care a fig. The feast was even more wonderful than usual. Yes, he would remember this night as one of his best at Hogwarts yet. He couldn't wait to tell Rose and Ginny about it.

The next day, the grounds of Hogwarts was in chaos as the students hurried to catch the Hogwarts Express back to London. Harry managed to get a compartment for him, Ron and Hermione. He pulled Neville in to join them and the twins soon showed up to sit with them.

They spent the trip back, talking and laughing. Harry and Ron got into a friendly discussion with Neville over the Chudley Cannons Quidditch Team. Hermione discussed some ideas the twins had on tricks and pranks for a while but she mostly had her nose in a book.

Soon, they arrived at the platform. Harry pulled Neville and Hermione with him when he and Ron went over to greet their families.

"Dad, Mum," he said as they came up to him with Rose, "this is Neville Longbottom. Neville, my parents. Oh, that's my sister, Rose. She'll be joining us next year at Hogwarts together with Ron's sister, Ginny."

Rose rolled her eyes, "Gee, thanks for remembering me, big brother." She shyly smiled at the slightly pudgy boy who also smiled back.

"So, you're Frank and Alice's boy." James said, "I'm glad Harry got to know you in Hogwarts. Your parents are among the best aurors under me. It's a pity we never had time to get to know each other's family."

Neville beamed at the praise for his parents. "It's an honor to meet you, sir and Mrs. Potter," shaking their hands.

"Dad," Harry said, "I was wondering if Neville and Hermione could come over some time. They're both their parents' only children and it probably gets lonely for them during summer. Neville can stay in my room and I'm sure Rose wouldn't mind another girl with her..."

"Harry, Harry," his father said, amused at his son's nervousness, "okay, it's okay. I'm sure we can accommodate them. I'll just have to adjust the wards at Potter Manor for the two of them."

Harry grinned, "Thanks, Dad."

"Of course," Lily said, "That won't be for at least a couple of weeks."

Harry's eyebrows rose in question.

"Well, young man," Lily said, "we still aren't happy with you for going into danger. To prove our point, you're grounded for two weeks. You'll stay in your room, doing homework, no telly or videogames, not even going to the Burrow. At any rate, I'm sure Molly will have Ron too busy to make up for his part in your little escapade."

Harry looked at his mother in horror, and then scowled at the grin on his sister's face. Neville looked away in embarrassment.

Harry saw Ron nearby, red-faced as his mother was scolding him. Ginny was standing behind her mother, wearing a look of both amusement and sympathy on her face.

Hermione came over to the Potters, leading her parents who were dentists. They seemed a bit apprehensive but Harry's mother soon put them at ease. After agreeing to allow their daughter to visit Potter Manor, they followed their daughter to meet the Weasleys. Harry noticed a smile creep on Ron's face as he watched Hermione approach his family. *Interesting.*

He moved up to the Weasleys with Rose. He was immediately smothered in a hug by Molly Weasley, "How are you, Harry dear? The things you and Ron get into, really!"

"It's okay, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, his voice muffled from within her arms. "Have you met our other friend, Hermione?" he asked, hoping to distract her.

"Why, yes," Mrs. Weasley said, pulling back, "Ron was just introducing her. I think it's good of you to befriend her. She must have felt out of place at Hogwarts, being muggleborn."

Ron introduced Hermione to Ginny who was now standing side by side with Rose. The two redheads looked similar though Ginny had freckles all over her face.

Ron looked to Ginny, "You know, I thought it would be good for you and Rose to have an older girl as a friend. Maybe she'll be able to control you two."

Ginny and Rose scowled then Ginny stepped on his foot while Rose hit him hard on the arm.

"OWW! What was that for?" Ron shouted at the two redheads, hopping on one foot while rubbing his arm. He scowled at Harry and Hermione who were covering their mouths with their hands, shaking.

"That was for being such a git, Ron." Ginny said, glaring, "You're lucky we don't have our wands yet."

"You better watch out, Ron," Harry teased, "Next term, these two are going to be a real terror."

"You better believe it, Harry," Rose said, "We heard what you, Ron, Hermione and the twins were up to and we want in."

Harry's eyes widened in shock and concern. *Well, they were five now, two more couldn't hurt. Maybe Neville would like to join the New Marauders, rounding their number up to eight.*

Later, as he and his family walked to the Ministry car his father was allowed to use on occasion, Harry reminisced about the past year and thought about the coming summer. He looked forward to Neville and Hermione visiting.

He'd even have a joint birthday celebration with Neville. He was surprised to learn that Neville's birthday was just a day before his.

Of course, he'd have to get through his enforced confinement first. *Merlin*. He grimaced. He wondered how he would survive two weeks without Ron, television, his music and even videogames. He just hoped the next two weeks would pass quickly.

Chapter 7: Summer talks

Harry was seated at the mahogany desk of his room, scratching with a quill on some parchment, numerous books spread open around the same desk. Pausing, he looked out the window and frowned.

Outside, the weather was bright and sunny and he could see the little figure of his sister floating around on a broom. It had been a tough two weeks with him stuck in his room, doing nothing but homework. At least, he ate his meals with the rest of his family in the dining room. Thankfully, today was the last day of his punishment. *Now, if only I could finish this potions essay.*

For the nth time, he silently cursed Snape for being a git. Who else would have given so much summer homework? Four feet on the uses of troll blood, three feet on the properties of European waterplants and five feet on the results of mixing any of the potions they had done in the past year, every combination. At least his father had agreed with his opinion of Snape in general and the homework in particular, but his mother insisted he finish it before he would be allowed to enjoy his summer.

Now, Harry picked up a ruler and measured his work on the last essay. He put it down in disgust. He was still short six inches, even if he wrote in rather large letters. He wondered what else he could find to fill it. He looked again out the window, seeing Rose now flying low over their mother's flower garden.

Harry sighed. Rose had not made the last two weeks any easier, teasing him by playing the radio in her room and the telly in the family room on high volume and flying past his bedroom window every so often, not to mention, talking about her constant visits to the Burrow.

Of course, she also told him about Ron being stuck with all sorts of chores as his version of grounding. This filled Harry with a mixture of relief that he wasn't alone in his suffering and guilt that he was the reason for Ron's punishment.

Harry sighed again and turned back to his essay. After twenty minutes of searching through the books around him, he threw down his quill in frustration. He moved to his bed and threw himself on top

of it, lying down on his back with his hands behind his head. He needed a break.

Harry gazed wistfully around his room. There was an empty space in the middle of his cabinet, about the right size for a television. His parents had removed it along with his Playstation and Atari videogames as part of his punishment. Even his old toy chest was locked up.

Sometimes, he wondered if it had been worth it. But then, he'd rather be bored than cowering and waiting for Voldemort to come get him. Again, he thought about his confrontation with old snakeface, as he had now come to call him.

Over the past two weeks, as he lay on his bed at night, he had wondered about the reason why Voldemort had wanted to kill him. At first, he had accepted his parents' answers. But as he thought about it more and more, he wondered why Voldemort hadn't killed his parents first if it was just an ordinary attack against his enemies.

He decided to ask his friends for their opinions. Maybe Ron and Hermione could suggest what to do. He just felt that his parents were hiding something. As frustrating as that was, he knew he wouldn't be able to discover what that was for now.

Harry then got up and went to his door. Slowly opening it, he peeked around. Seeing no one, he stepped out and made ready head on downstairs. He hoped his parents might relent with his punishment today since he hadn't complained about it since he got home.

He had just gotten a few feet from his door, when he heard a pop behind him.

"Master Harry shouldn't be out of his room," a high-pitched squeaky voice said.

Harry sighed and turned around to face a small creature with tennisball -sized green eyes and large bat-like ears, wearing a butler suit with the crest of the Potter family on the left breastpocket.

"Come on, Blinky," Harry said, "It's the last day. Surely, I earned a pass by now." Blinky was one of the four free house elves who worked for the Potters. The others were his wife, Mimi and their children, Orni and Lamni.

"Mistress Lily hasn't said anything to me, Master Harry," Blinky said sternly, shaking a finger at the boy, "Master can come down later for lunch."

"But that's two hours from now," Harry whined, "Can't I just take a walk in the garden. I'm bored!"

"Master Harry still hasn't finished his homework," Blinky said.

"But I'm stuck! I've only got six inches to go and there isn't anything I can add. Please, Blinky, let me walk around a bit. I haven't had any sun since I got home." Harry made a sad puppy dog look on his face.

After a while, the house-elf said, "Oh, all right, Master Harry. Just a walk, mind you. I'll have to tell Mistress Lily later when she gets home."

Harry grinned, "Thanks, Blinky. Oh, by the way, remember what I said last year, I don't want you to call me Master anymore. Just call me Harry. You and your family are free elves. You may work for us but I want to be considered as your friend and not just your employer."

"No, no," Blinky said, clearly flustered, "It not right, Master Harry. Even if we is getting wages and clothes, we is just house-elves. It not right to presume more, especially with Harry Potter and his family."

Curious, Harry asked, "Why is that, Blinky? What's so different with me and my family?"

"Why, you is Harry Potter," Blinky said, "since you beat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, we house-elves have been treated better by wizards."

Harry frowned. He'd never known house-elves were treated badly before. His parents had always been respectful of their house-elves

and taught their children the same. He'd have to ask them about it sometime, especially his dad since he was a pureblood wizard.

"All right, Blinky," Harry said, "We'll discuss this another time."

"Yes, Master Harry," Blinky said, and he disappeared.

Harry moved outside to the garden and reveled in the warm feeling of the sun on his body.

"Hey! What are you doing out here?" he heard Rose yell at him from above.

Harry smirked as he looked up at her, "Just enjoying the sun."

"You're supposed to be studying," she said to him, "I'll tell Mum and Dad."

"I'm almost done, just a few more inches on one last essay," Harry replied, "Anyway, I asked Blinky for permission. He'll probably beat you to telling Mum. Plus, it's the last day of my detention."

At that, Rose smiled, "Hey, that means Ginny can come over again." She landed beside her brother.

"I guess so," Harry said, "Ron will be glad to, anyway. I hope he's not too ticked off at me for landing him in trouble with his parents."

"Nope, I don't think so, Harry," Rose said, "he's quite the big thing with his brothers now. None of them ever had such an adventure." Suddenly, she dropped her broom and hugged Harry fiercely.

Harry was surprised by this for a moment. Then, he awkwardly hugged her back. "Hey, sprite, what's wrong?" he asked her.

"I suddenly remembered you confronted You-Know-Who again, just like you did when we were babies," her voice muffled.

He pulled back and held her at arm's length. He was surprised to see that her eyes were moist and glistening, "Come on, sis. It's all right."

She suddenly slapped him on his arm, "You could have died, you big git! When I heard, I was so worried. I don't know what I'd do without you to bother."

Harry's heart swelled. His sister really did care for him, in spite of her teasing.

He led her back to the porch and sat her down on one of the sundeck chairs, then sat beside her, wrapping his arm around her. She laid her head on his shoulder.

"Don't you worry, sis," he said, "I survived again. I doubt he'll be back anytime soon. There's no reason I'll be meeting up with him again."

They sat in silence for what seemed like a long time. Finally, Rose said, "So, what do we do when Ron and Ginny get here?"

Harry smiled, "Oh, I don't know yet. I'm sure we can think of something."

They heard a pop and another house-elf, this time wearing a yellow dress, stood there in front of them.

"Lunch is ready, young master and young mistress," she said.

The young Potters smiled. "Thanks, Mimi," Harry said, then turned to Rose, "Come on, sis. Let's eat."

After lunch, Harry decided to give the essay another try. He first went to the library to get a few more books on potions. Three hours later, he had only added another three inches to it. He sighed in frustration. Hopefully, his mum could help him out. She was quite good with potions.

Just then, he heard a knock on his door. Turning around, he saw his mum standing in the open door of his room, her arms crossed over her chest. He gulped at the stern look on her face.

"I heard you left this room before lunchtime," she said.

“Er, yeah, Mum,” Harry said uncertainly, “I just needed to clear my head. I thought a little sun couldn’t hurt.” When she didn’t make any comment but continued to stare at him, he added, “Please, Mum, it was just for a while. I was already on my last bit of homework, just six inches short. I went back to it after lunch.” He picked up the parchment and waved it at her, “Could you take a look? I’m still short three inches and I can’t find anything else to add. Please?”

Lily held her stern look for another few seconds then gave him a little smile, “Well, I guess you’ve earned a pass since you’ve been a good boy these past two weeks. Let’s see that essay. What’s the subject?”

“Erm, it’s a potions essay.” Harry answered, “It’s about reactions from mixing the different potions we learned to brew this year.”

“That’s a bit over your head,” Lily said, frowning, as she took the parchment from her son. She skimmed through it, then said, “Well, looks like you’ve covered most of it, but I think you should consider the effects of mixing the calming potion and the agitation-producing potion.”

“Wouldn’t they cancel each other out?” Harry asked.

“Remember that the strength of these potions depends on the amount of the ingredients. Consider if one or the other had more of some ingredients.”

Harry thought about it for a while, then he understood. “Thanks, Mum,” he said, smiling.

Lily smiled also, “Glad to help.” She turned around to leave the room.

“Mum?”

Lily turned around, “Yes, Harry?”

“Um, Rose and I had a bit of a talk.” Harry said. After a short pause, “She was quite worried for me, wasn’t she?”

Lily closed the door and sat on Harry’s bed, patting a spot beside her. Harry sat down.

"We all were, Harry," she said, "At least, me and your dad were there with you in the hospital wing. She was quite upset about being left at the Burrow. Molly and Ginny tried to distract her, but..."

Harry hung his head, "I'm sorry for worrying all of you, for putting my friends in danger," then his head came up, "but not for what we did. Come on, mum. What were we supposed to do? Dumbledore was gone, McGonagall wouldn't listen. I couldn't let the Stone get stolen, with Voldemort wanting it. Once we were down there, we couldn't stop until the Stone was safe."

Lily sighed, then put her hand on Harry's shoulder, "I realize that, Harry," she smiled at him, "You're your father's son. You just can't stand back and do nothing while something bad can happen. You want to help no matter what."

Harry blinked in surprise. It seemed his mother understood him.

"Harry," Lily said, "I don't want you to think that we were punishing you for going after the Stone. We appreciate that you tried to warn Professor Dumbledore. We just want you to think a bit more before doing something like this again."

"I realize that now, Mum," Harry said, "It's a bit hard to think when you're so worked up. I mean, I was so concerned to stop Snape, I let three of my friends come along even though we knew almost nothing about what we'd face after Fluffy."

"You know, that still amazes me that my 11-year old son and his friends could get through things many adult wizards wouldn't dare face. Like your Dad said, we are proud of what you did, in spite of the circumstances." She then pulled Harry into a hug, "We're just glad you're alive."

Harry suffered through the motherly hug, something Ron or any other 11-year old boy would have tried to get out off immediately. When his mother finally released him, he asked, "Mum, about Snape, why is it he and Dad seem to hate each other? I noticed even Uncle Sirius and Remus weren't too friendly with him, not like you."

Lily looked down at her son for a moment before replying, "That is between Severus and James, something from our days at Hogwarts and remember, he's Professor Snape to you."

"He did something to Dad, didn't he?" Harry asked.

Lily looked down for a moment, a mannerism Harry had learned meant his mother was thinking about what to say.

"Harry, believe it or not, your father was a different person back then," Lily said. Seeing the skeptical and questioning look on her son's face, she added, "Oh, he was a typical Gryffindor. He was just as brave and honorable as he is now, but before our sixth year, let's just say I didn't like James Potter very much and wanted little to do with him outside of classes and homework."

Harry's eyebrows rose in surprise. Then again, most of the stories he'd heard from his father and his friends had been about Hogwarts in general. The stories he had been told about their pranks never gave any specifics like the names of who they pranked except that they were almost always Slytherins or the spells they used. He and Rose had never been told about how their parents had gotten together, not that they'd ever been interested in such. Now, he was curious and a bit disturbed that his parents hadn't always gotten along.

"So, what was he like then, Mum?" Harry asked, "How'd you two end up together and does Snape have anything to do with it?"

Lily again dipped her head, "All I can tell you, sweetie, is that Severus and I were friends even if he was in Slytherin and I was in Gryffindor. We still are, after a fashion, even after I hooked up with your father. About your father's character then and how we came together, that is something best left for another time. I didn't expect you to be interested in that sort of thing yet. Anyway, it's almost time for dinner." She got up and walked to the door, opening it and going through. Then she turned around, "Oh, since you'll be free of this room tomorrow, you can floo call Ron later and invite him over if you want."

Harry grinned and said, "Thanks, Mum."

Chapter 8: Summer Birthdays and a trip to Diagon Alley

The next day, Ron and Ginny came over after breakfast through the floo network.

"Finally," Ron said, after dusting himself off, "Mum had me cleaning the attic and degnoming the garden *by hand*. Blimey, that was real hard work. And little Miss Perfect over there," pointing his thumb at Ginny, who had just stumbled through the floo, "didn't make it any easier with her laughing and teasing."

Ginny smiled cheekily at her brother then moving up to Harry, embraced him, "Hey, you, long time no see."

"Yeah, right," Harry said, grinning, "it's only been two weeks since we came home from Hogwarts. Of course, I've been confined to my room most of the time, while your twin-in-all-but-name terrorized the house-elves and irked me quite a bit.....Oww!"

Rose had just hit Harry on the arm, "Serves you right! You know, Ginny, it's a good thing we'll be at Hogwarts in a few weeks. Someone's got to keep an eye on these two bozos."

Harry and Ron both yelled, "Hey!" Ron added. "We don't need any minders, especially girls younger than us."

Rose and Ginny simply rolled their eyes then moved off to go upstairs. Just as she got to the foot of the stairs, Ginny turned around and said, smiling, "I'm glad you're okay, Harry," then she raced after Rose before Harry could say anything.

Harry raised an eyebrow. Normally, Ginny paid little attention to him after greeting him every time she and Ron came over or whenever Harry and Rose went to the Burrow.

He turned to Ron, who just shrugged and asked, "So, what do we do now, mate?"

"How about a nice fly around the back?" Harry said.

The rest of July passed in quickly for the four kids. Soon, it was the morning of the 31st.

Harry was awakened by a sudden blast of sound in his ear, "Yahhh! What the hell was that?" he said as he sat up in his bed. He found his sister laughing hysterically at him, a muggle bicycle horn in her hand.

Harry scowled, "*What'd you do that for?* Can't a bloke have a lie-in on a summer morning?"

Rose smiled sweetly at him, "Come on, big brother, do you really expect me to believe you want to lie here on your birthday?"

Harry said, "Can't fool you, can I?" Then he grinned and said, "Now, dear sister, unless to want to see me starkers, you'll clear out so I can get dressed."

Rose scowled, "Ewww! That's something I don't want to see." She then ran out of Harry's room.

Once he had showered and changed, Harry went down to the kitchen, where they usually had their family meals together. When he went through the doors, he was greeted by a chorus of "Happy Birthday!"s.

Standing around the kitchen table were his parents and sister and the four house-elves, a delicious-looking cake being held by the latter four. Harry grinned and said, "Thanks, everyone."

His mother came forward and hugged him. His father patted him affectionately on the back then ruffled Harry's already messy hair.

"Hey, Dad!" Harry said, "Cut it out. I'm twelve already."

James laughed, "Well, son. You'll always be my little boy." Harry frowned.

Rose giggled, "Well, Dad, I'll always be glad to be your little girl, even when I turn seventeen."

The Potters settled down to a nice breakfast. Lily cast a preservation charm on the cake to keep it fresh for Harry's dinnertime party. After

breakfast, Harry and Rose did some flying in the backyard. Charms and wards kept them from being seen by muggles.

After a couple of hours, Harry and Rose moved to the living room to watch a little television. Just before lunch, the fireplace flared green and two redheads stepped out.

“Happy Birthday, mate,” Ron said, slapping Harry on the back.

Ginny came up and said, “Happy Birthday, Harry!” Then, she gave him a hug. Harry was surprised by this as she had only greeted him on previous birthdays with a pat on the arm or a smile, in spite of their being friends for years. Harry was further surprised and confused by a warm feeling that settled in his stomach.

Before he could think about it, she released him. Then, Ron asked him, “So, seen your presents yet?”

“Nope,” Harry replied to his friend, grinning, “unlike you, I can be patient.”

“Um, Harry,” Ron said, “how are Neville and Hermione coming over?”

“Oh,” Harry said, “Dad gave the floo address to Neville’s parents and I think he’s going to get Hermione from her house. I’m not sure if they’ll take the floo, apparate or portkey in.”

Just then, the fireplace flared green and Neville stepped out of it. Harry and Ron hurried over to greet him.

“Hey, Neville,” Harry said, “Great to see you. Oh, belated happy birthday. I’m glad we can celebrate together.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Neville said, “Hi, Ron.” He looked around the living room. “Nice place you’ve got here. Looks just as cozy as Longbottom Manor.”

“Thanks, I’m sure it is.” Harry replied, “Oh, you remember Ron’s sister, Ginny and my sister, Rose, from the train station?”, gesturing to the two redheaded girls.

Neville smiled and shook their hands. "Hi, girls. Nice to see you again. I heard you'll be coming over to Hogwarts this year."

"We're only going there if we get our letters. We're just turning eleven this month," Ginny replied, "me in eleven days and Rose just a couple of days before September 1st."

Ron snorted, "Yeah, right. I doubt you won't. If you two aren't magical enough, I'm a squibb."

A pop sounded behind them and as they turned around, a mass of bushy brown hair moved against Ron and Harry, engulfing them. "I'm so glad to see you two!"

Ron and Harry laughed, "Hey, Hermione. Come on, it's only been a month," returning the embrace of their female best friend.

After releasing her best friends, Hermione turned around and saw Neville and her friends' sisters, "Oh, hi, Neville. You're here already. Happy Birthday to you, too. Hi, Ginny, Rose."

"Hi, Hermione," Neville said, a bit pink, "Thanks for the greeting."

"So, Hermione," Ron said, "how'd you get here?"

"Well, Ronald," Hermione replied, a bit frostily, "since I didn't come out of the fireplace, not by floo and since I'm alone and not yet seventeen, then I can't have apparated. So, I came by portkey." She held out a teacup.

"How was it?" Harry asked, "I've never traveled by portkey yet."

"Weird. There's a pulling sensation around your navel and a feeling of being pulled inside out. I'm not eager to repeat the experience anytime soon."

"Sounds bad," Ron said, "I think I'll stick to the floo."

"Well, Hermione," Harry said, "Maybe my Dad can get your house connected to the floo network even if your parents are muggles."

Just then, Blinky popped in, causing Hermione to give a short screech, "What is that!"

"Oh, this is Blinky, Hermione," Harry said, "He's a house-elf. They're sort of like servants in the wizarding world. Most wizarding families of status or wealth have them, though many of them treat them like slaves, making them wear rags and towels. We employ four, as a family, pay them proper wages and wear proper clothes. They only stay because they like the work. Otherwise, Mum would probably let them leave." He looked down at Blinky who was cowering behind his legs after hearing Hermione's screech. "Come on out, Blinky. This is my friend, Hermione Granger. She didn't mean to frighten you, she's never seen a house-elf before since she's muggleborn. Over there, that's Neville Longbottom. They'll probably be coming over often now."

Hermione got on her knees in front of Blinky, "Hi, Blinky. I'm sorry if I scared you."

Blinky got out from behind Harry and said, "Er, that's all right, Mistress Granger. Blinky just wanted to let the young master and mistress and their weezys know that lunch is ready."

"What did he call Ron and Ginny?" Neville asked, "Weezeys?"

"Well, they seem to have a hard time pronouncing Weasley." Harry explained, "Come on, guys, let's have lunch."

After lunch in the kitchen, Hermione and Neville were given a tour of Potter Manor. Then, the six kids spent time in the playroom, with Neville intrigued by the computer and play station.

The dinnertime party was a wonderful affair as the rest of the Weasleys, Sirius, Remus, Neville's parents and grandmother came over to Potter Manor. Harry liked the presents he had gotten, like the new pair of Quidditch gloves from Ron and Ginny, the broom servicing kit from his parents and sister and a book titled "Best seekers in the last fifty years" from Hermione. Neville was surprised to receive as many presents, including a book on Herbology from each of the trio. The party ended well after midnight with everyone satisfied and full.

Over the next few days, Hermione and Neville were frequent visitors to Potter Manor, usually Neville going off with Ron and Harry and Hermione spending time with Rose and Ginny. The younger girls were glad to get a girl's viewpoint of Hogwarts since their knowledge of the school came from the more numerous boys of their families.

Ginny's eleventh birthday was celebrated in the Burrow. It started off well at breakfast with a school owl bringing her letter of acceptance to Hogwarts, which left Rose a little envious when she learned about it. The Weasleys held a party in the evening with the Potters, Hermione and Neville as invited guests. Hermione was fascinated by the way the Weasleys used magic in their daily activities and by the Burrow's crazy layout.

Among the presents Ginny got were two dresses with frilly lace from her parents. She looked at this with disgust. "They still think I'm six years old," she confided to Rose, "I can't wear them to Hogwarts. At least, my brothers got me some jeans and I like the green jumper your parents gave me."

"Yeah," Rose said, smirking, "I noticed that green was getting to be a favorite color of yours lately."

"Hey! I have a few older clothes in green."

"Right, three dresses out of thirty. That compares to five of the last six dresses and tops you bought this year. I wonder why you like that color all of a sudden. Does it have something to do with someone's eyes?"

"Oh, shut it." Ginny said, her face reddening like her hair and she scowled at the amused look on her best friend's face. Thankfully, the rest of her family, especially the twins and the other guests didn't hear their conversation.

A week later, Hogwarts letters arrived and the two families decided to take a trip to Diagon Alley the following Saturday for the coming year's schoolbooks. Ron and Harry would meet with Hermione and her parents there. Rose prevailed upon her parents to get her school things already even if she hadn't gotten her letter yet.

One strange thing about their book lists was the fact that all the books for Defense Against the Dark Arts were written by one Gilderoy Lockhart. He was a wizard whose exploits against dark creatures was well known in the wizarding world through the books he himself had written and women went gaga over him because he was quite handsome. Needless to say, James was quite suspicious of him and his exploits. Lily would often tease him that he was just jealous of Lockhart's good looks.

After a stop at Gringotts, the Potters and Weasleys split up, with the womenfolk going to Madame Malkin's for new school robes for Ginny and Rose and the males going to Quality Quidditch Supplies and the Pet Emporium, except for Percy who said he wanted a new set of quills. They all agreed to meet in an hour at Flourish and Blotts, the bookstore.

The men noted a sign outside the sports store which announced a book signing session by Lockhart for his latest book *Magical Me* at Flourish and Blotts at the time they would be there.

"Just great," James said, "We get to see the big blowhard. Bloody publicity seeker he is."

Harry and Ron snickered at this comment. It was a good thing the girls and women were not there, especially Lily Potter.

When they got to the bookstore, there was already a large crowd. Molly, Ginny and Rose were near the front, lining up with Lockhart's other fans to get books signed. Lily was on one side watching the circus with a smile of amusement on her face.

James spotted Hermione and her parents standing nearby and went over to them to introduce Arthur Weasley to the elder Grangers, the latter excited to meet the muggles.

Harry, Ron, Fred and George moved forward to stand beside Lily and get a good view of Lockhart. When Lockhart saw Harry, he grabbed him before Lily could intervene; making Harry stand next to him while a photographer from the Daily Prophet took their photos.

When Lockhart tried to give Harry a full batch of his books, Lily stepped in and allowed Harry to slip away from the blonde man.

As Harry slunk back to the back of the crowd, a drawling voice said, "Hah, I bet you loved that stunt, Potter." It was Draco Malfoy.

Before Harry could answer the Slytherin boy, Ginny said, "Sod off, you. Harry didn't want any of that. He's no gloryhound."

Draco smirked, "Well, Potter. Looks like you got yourself a girlfriend. She looks a bit puny though."

Harry felt his blood boil over Draco's insult to Ginny, who had turned scarlet. As he moved forward with his fists balled, he felt himself being held back by the twins. "Harry, don't do it," Hermione said, "It's not worth it."

Draco glanced at her and said, "Mind your own business, you mudblood know-it-all."

Several gasps were heard. Ron lunged at Draco but was suddenly held back by his father.

"My, my, Arthur. Can't you control your brood? Trying to attack another boy like that?"

This was said by a blonde man dressed in impeccable robes of high quality, who was now standing behind Draco. He had a smirk on his face and a silver snake-tipped cane in one hand.

"Then you should make sure your son minds his language, Lucius." Arthur said.

Mr. Malfoy merely smirked. Then he saw Ginny holding her new cauldron filled with her books. Among the brand new books for DADA, Mr. Malfoy picked up a battered copy of *The Standard Book of Spell, Grade 1*.

"Well, well, this is interesting. With the money you're getting as a deputy minister, Arthur, I'd expect you to be able to afford new things for all your children. But then, with such a large brood as you have, a

government salary isn't enough. Pity you don't have as large a vault as your children's best friend, hmm."

"And what do you mean by that, Malfoy?" James Potter said, coming up from behind Arthur Weasley who had turned as red as his hair.

"Ah, Potter." Mr. Malfoy said, "I knew you wouldn't be far away, especially if your famous son is here. Your two families are quite close to each other these days, Mr. Head Auror. Birds of a feather as the muggles say. Speaking of muggles," he glanced over to the Grangers, who were standing nearby and looking apprehensive, "how disgraceful two wizarding families can get, associating with them."

"We have different opinions of what can disgrace a wizarding family, Malfoy," James said hotly.

"Yes, I can see that," Mr. Malfoy said, looking clearly at Lily, "You went so far as to marry a mudblood."

Pandemonium broke out as James lunged at Malfoy Sr, knocking him into several tables filled with books. A lot of books were scattered as they rolled on the floor; there were yells of "Get him, Dad" from Harry and Rose, "Get him, Mr. Potter" from Ron, Fred and George and "James, no!" from Lily; shrieks from Mrs. Weasley saying "Arthur, stop them!"; the shop assistants saying "Please, gentlemen" and then a booming voice said, "All right, gents, break it up."

Hagrid picked both men up and separated them. Both men had black eyes.

Mr. Malfoy tore himself from Hagrid's grasp, "How dare you, Potter. I should bring you up on charges for this."

"Just try it, Malfoy," James said, "It may give me the opportunity to get another chance to search your place. I know there are Dark Arts artifacts there."

Mr. Malfoy just scowled and thrust Ginny's book, which he was still holding, back into her cauldron. He gestured to Draco and they were gone.

Lily rounded on James, as their children rushed to him, “James, really, brawling in front of the children.”

James grinned at her, “Now, I can’t have him insulting my wife, can I?”

“That was great, Dad,” Harry said, “you really showed him. Wish I could have done the same to his son.”

“Harry!” Lily said, “don’t lower yourself to their level.”

“Yer mum’s right, ‘arry,” Hagrid said, “Rotten ter the core, that family. Nuthin’ will come of gettin’ into a tussle with that bunch.” He turned to James, “Yeh shouldn’t let him rile yeh like that, James, even if he said that.”

“What does that word ‘mudblood’ mean?” Hermione asked.

“It’s a really foul name for someone who’s muggleborn, like you or Mrs. Potter,” Ron said, “It’s one of the most insulting things you can call someone in the wizarding world. People like the Malfoys think they’re better than everyone else simply because they’re what they’d call pure-blood.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, “It’s ridiculous. Dirty blood, common blood. It’s really stupid. Most wizarding families are halfblood now.”

“Right,” Ron said, “Most of us know it doesn’t mean a thing. Being pure-blood doesn’t make you a better wizard. Look at you and Mrs. Potter, both of you are brilliant with spells and your parents are muggles. If wizards hadn’t married muggles, we’d have died out.” He didn’t seem to notice Hermione turn a nice shade of red.

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” Lily said, “We’d better go. It’s almost lunchtime. Hermione, why don’t you and your parents join us for lunch?”

The days flew by after that and soon it was the 30th of August. Harry sneaked up to Rose’s room at 6 that morning, holding the muggle bike horn his sister had used on him the morning of his birthday. As

he slowly stepped into the darkened room, his bare feet stepped on several sharp objects.

“Oww, oww, oww!” he yelled. Light flooded the room and his sister stood there smirking at him. “Thought you could take a page out of my book, eh?” she asked him, laughing.

Harry hopped around on one foot, extracting the jackstones embedded in the sole, a scowl on his face. “It was worth a try,” he said.

Later, as they ate breakfast, Rose seemed preoccupied, her gaze on the windows of the kitchen, fidgeting in her seat.

Lily smiled, “Don’t worry, honey. It may take a while for the school owls to find the house.”

Rose merely scowled, then she perked up when she saw a tiny dot in the distance. It steadily became larger until it became the unmistakable profile of an owl. In minutes, it swooped through the window Harry opened and dropped a large envelope with green ink in Rose’s lap. Rose just sat there, looking at it in apprehension.

Finally, Harry said, “Well? Aren’t you going to open it?”

Rose shook her head, “No, what if it says I can’t be accepted?”

“It won’t, silly,” Harry said, laughing, “Otherwise, they wouldn’t have bothered to write you.”

With trembling hands, Rose slowly opened the envelope and read the letter contained within. “YES!” she finally yelled, her hand pumping upward, “I’m going to Hogwarts!”

Harry grinned, “Congratulations, sis. Happy Birthday again.”

James and Lily hugged and congratulated their daughter and the family returned to their breakfast.

Later, Ginny came over through the fireplace. Rose ran over to greet her, clutching her Hogwarts letter.

“Happy Birthday!” Ginny squealed, hugging her.

“It certainly is now,” Rose said, showing her the Hogwarts letter.

“You got your letter!” Ginny said, “Great! Now we’re really going together. I hope we both get into the same house, even Gryffindor.”

Rose smirked, “I doubt otherwise. Since when has a Weasley or Potter not been in Gryffindor?”

“True, true,” Ginny said, “Oh, I’ve got something to show you.” She showed Rose a small, thin black book. “It’s not your birthday present. I found it in within that old copy of *The Standard Book of Spells*.”

“Come on, let’s look at it closely in my room,” Rose said, heading for the staircase to the second floor.

In the sitting room, they found Harry lounging in one of the armchairs.

“Hey, Ginny,” he called, “Where’s Ron?”

“Oh, uh, he’s degnoming the garden with the twins,” Ginny said, keeping her head down, “he’ll be over later for Rose’s party.” She then moved rapidly to Rose’s room, dragging her with her.

Harry raised an eyebrow. It seemed to him that Ginny had been acting oddly the whole summer. He wondered if it would be like that when they got to Hogwarts in a couple of days. He looked forward to riding the Hogwarts Express again.

Later that evening, the Potters had a party for Rose with the Weasleys, Sirius, Remus, Hermione and Neville as guests. Among her presents were a wandholder from Remus, her godfather, a jumper knitted by Mrs. Weasley, a pair of nice jeans from the Weasley kids and a brand new trunk from her parents and brother.

It was almost midnight by the time the guests left. Before she left, Ginny approached Rose, “See you at the platform, Rose.”

"Yep, see you there. Thanks again for the jeans. Oh, by the way," her voice lowered to a whisper, "What are you going to do with that diary?"

"Um, well," Ginny replied, "Tom seems friendly enough. He may tell us something about Hogwarts the others don't know."

"I don't know, Ginny," Rose said, "I have a bad feeling about it."

"Oh, all right," Ginny said, "I'll keep it at the bottom of my trunk for now." She raised her voice to its normal level, as she embraced Rose again, "Well, Happy Birthday again. See you soon."

Rose returned the embrace and watched her best friend step into the fireplace and disappear. She hoped Ginny would forget about the diary of Tom Marvolo Riddle. Something about it gave her the creeps. Anyway, in another day, they would be at Hogwarts with their brothers. She hoped they ended up in the same house.

Chapter 9: Back to Hogwarts

Strangely, the Potters got to King's Station by quarter to eleven on September 1st. Several things seemed to go wrong that morning. First, the ministry car picking them up had two flat tires within minutes of each other. Then, the driver got off the wrong turnoff to London. In London, the traffic lights kept turning red on them. Then, there was parked car blocking the entrance to the station the bobbies couldn't move. The Potters then stepped out of the car and unloaded it in the middle of the road.

"Hurry, James," Lily said, moving rapidly as she pulled Rose along, "We're late. The Express will be leaving in another 15 minutes."

"We'll just make it," James, "Look, there are the Weasleys, about to go through the barrier." He called out, "Arthur, Molly, wait!"

Sure enough, a mass of redheads stood at the wall between platforms 9 and 10. They all turned at the shout of Mr. Potter. Harry noticed that Percy was wearing a badge with a big letter 'P' on it over his muggle clothing. The big prat, he couldn't wait to get to Hogwarts to show off his being made a prefect.

"James, Lily," Mrs. Weasley said, "I would thought you'd be on the other side already. Hello, Harry. Hi, Rose."

"We had a few problems today, Molly," Lily said, "All sorts of strange mishaps delayed us. Otherwise, we'd have been here ages ago."

"Hey, mate," Ron called to Harry, "I never thought you'd get here after us."

"I know, with Mum nagging us, we would have been here at least an hour ago," Harry said, "But like she said, all sort of weird stuff kept happening to us, the ministry driver couldn't find us, then it couldn't get off the freeway at the right exit, then all the traffic lights turned red on us, stuff that wouldn't be weird by themselves but all together?"

Before Ron could reply, their parents came over and started hustling the children and their trolleys through the barrier, careful to avoid the notice of the muggles. First, went the twins, then Percy and Arthur,

followed by Molly and Ginny, then Lily with Rose. James came over to Ron and Harry.

"All right, boys?" he asked, "I'll go through then you two follow me."

James went through the barrier after a look around. Harry and Ron then set themselves behind the trolleys bearing their trunks and took off running for the wall.

CRASH!

Their trolleys hit the wall and bounced off, scattering their trunks on the ground, including Hedwig's cage whereupon the poor owl started squawking and causing a scene. Harry and Ron groggily picked themselves up from where they had landed on the ground. One of the station men shouted to them, "Hey, you! What do you think you're doing?"

"Sorry, lost control of the trolleys," Harry called to him. He then turned to Ron, "What's wrong? We can't seem to get through." He put his hand on the barrier and found it solid.

"We're going to miss the Express," Ron said, looking up at the station clock which was at 10:59, the second hand already at the number 10, counting down the seconds to 11.

"Um, Ron, what do we do?" Harry asked, "We're attracting a lot of attention." Sure enough, many people were looking at them in curiosity. "Maybe we should go outside and wait for our parents. The ministry car we used may still be here. We can wait near it."

"*The car!*" Ron suddenly said, "That's brilliant, Harry. We can use our car to get to Hogwarts."

"**Your** car, Ron?" Harry said, "That car your Dad showed us last month? The one he said was enchanted to fly and had an invisibility charm on it? *That* car?"

"Well, yeah," Ron said, "We used it to get here, though Mum doesn't know it can fly. Look, the barrier is down. The Express would have left by now. We need to get to school. We don't know how long it will

take for our parents to get back or even if they can get back. Come on, Harry, this is an emergency. We're allowed to use magic in an emergency."

"I don't know, Ron," Harry said, "Can you fly that thing? Is its invisibility charm strong enough? We'll get into trouble if we're seen, secrecy act and all. Though, I'd love to try it out, compare it to riding a broomstick."

"Hey, it can't be that hard, with magic guiding it, can it?" Ron said,

"Oh, all right," Harry said, "Let's go. Where did your dad park it?"

The two boys pushed their trolleys out and into the parking lot, stopping in front of a blue Ford Anglia parked in a secluded corner of the lot. They placed their trunks in the car's boot. They were about to enter the car when they heard a couple of pops behind them. They turned around to find their fathers standing there.

"Thank goodness, we caught you just in time," Mr. Weasley said. "I wasn't sure if you'd try to use this thing."

"It's a good thing you parked the car in a place where few muggles would have seen us, Arthur," James said, "Otherwise, we couldn't have Apparated here in time to catch these two from doing some mischief." He eyed both boys. "All right, boys?" he said in a deeper than usual tone.

Harry gulped. His father was using his official Auror voice. "Um, we can explain, Dad."

He told the two men about the barrier going solid on them. "Come on, Dad, please believe us. We wouldn't make up something like that just to try out this thing."

James looked at his son for a moment then said, "All right, I believe you. I tried to go back when you two didn't follow me immediately. I couldn't get through and had to Apparate."

Harry and Ron breathed a sigh of relief. If James Potter believed them, then Arthur Weasley would, too. They turned to look at the older man.

Arthur Weasley smiled at them. "Don't worry, boys. No harm done." He turned to James, "Well, James, how do we get these two to school now? The Express was leaving just as we Apparated."

James leaned back on the car for a moment, his hand cupping his chin. "We could ask Professor Dumbledore that, Arthur. The wards around Hogwarts prevent Apparating directly into the castle or the grounds. Maybe a portkey or the Floo will do. You wait here with the boys. I'll Apparate back to Potter Manor and contact him." With a twirl and a soft pop, James disappeared.

"All right, boys, just wait here," Arthur said, "I have to go tell your mothers." After doing a twirl, he too Disapparated.

Harry and Ron leaned back on the car, waiting. Soon enough, Molly and Lily came running to them, Arthur walking behind.

Molly pulled Ron into a tight hug, "Thank goodness, you two are safe. When you both didn't follow us through, we got worried, especially when we couldn't go back through the barrier." She pulled back from Ron, eyeing him suspiciously, "You didn't plan on using the car, did you?"

Behind her, Arthur shook his head and mouthed *Didn't tell her anything*.

"Oh no, Mum," Ron said, "We just decided to wait for you next to the car."

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, "We just wanted to wait for one of you to come find us."

"Oh, really?" Lily said, smirking, her arms crossed over her chest as she leaned on the car, "Then why are your trunks already in the car's boot? It would have been better to wait for us at the barrier."

Harry's eyes widened. He'd never get used to how intuitive their mothers were. He and Ron looked at each other nervously.

The boys were saved from further interrogation by a pop that announced the return of his father.

"All right, boys," James said, "The headmaster said that you can floo into Hogwarts from Potter Manor. We'll just head back there with the cars. He also sent an owl to the train telling them you'd get to Hogwarts by another way."

The boys nodded their heads. Then Harry turned to his dad, "Um, Dad, can I ride back home with the Weasleys?"

James raised an eyebrow, "Well, I guess it'll be fine if Arthur and Molly are okay with it." He turned to his wife, "Lily? Do you have any objections?" Lily shook her head though she was eyeing her son suspiciously.

Harry turned to Mrs. Weasley with a pleading look.

"Oh, all right," she said, "as long as your father and mother agree."

"Tell you what," Lily said, "I'll ride with you back to the Manor. That way, James can send back the Ministry cars and get to work. After all, you can't keep the Head Auror out all day." She grinned at her husband.

"Yes, dear," James said, grinning back, "That's fine with me." He turned to the elder Weasleys, shaking Arthur's hand and kissing Molly on the cheek, "Well, I'll see you two around."

He turned to Harry, who was scowling slightly. He bent down to tousle his son's already messy hair and whispered, "Nice try, son. You'll have to wait until summer to try out that car." He straightened, clapped Ron on the shoulder and Disapparated.

"All right, boys, come on," Lily said, smiling at them, "You can sit in the back with me. Molly and Arthur can sit up front."

The two boys grumpily got into the Ford Anglia for the trip back to Potter Manor.

An hour later, Harry stumbled out of the Headmaster's fireplace at Hogwarts and Ron followed, falling over on top of the prone Harry.

"Get off me, Ron!" he said.

The two boys got themselves sorted and found that they weren't alone.

"Good afternoon, boys," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling, "This is the first time since I became headmaster that we've had students who couldn't catch the train."

"It's not our fault, Professor," Harry said, "We don't know why we couldn't get through the barrier."

"Yes, yes, Harry," Dumbledore said, "Don't worry. Your father had already explained it to me. I imagine he'll investigate the matter." He looked at both boys, his eyes twinkling again, "It's a good thing that your fathers found you quickly. Who knows what would have happened if he didn't? "

Harry and Ron gulped. Did the elderly headmaster know what they were planning to do?

Dumbledore chuckled, "Not to worry, boys. It's all right now. Why don't you go to the kitchens for lunch? I'm sure Harry's father has told him how to get into them through a fruit portrait." He chuckled again at the surprised look on Harry's face. "Then, you can settle your things into your dormitory room. Hagrid will walk you over to the station to meet the train so you can come together with your classmates for the feast. I daresay a couple of redheaded first years would appreciate your support tonight."

Harry remembered then his sister and Ginny were starting at Hogwarts. "Come on, Ron. Let's get to lunch. We have to meet the girls." The two boys grabbed their trunks and dragged them to Gryffindor Tower.

Harry taught Ron how to enter the kitchens by tickling the pear on the fruit portrait. The house-elves gladly gave them a lunch that rivaled their usual meals. Then, they unpacked their things from their trunks.

Near sunset, Hagrid met them at the Entrance Hall. "All right, 'arry, Ron?"

They walked with the huge man to the station and soon they caught sight of the Express.

As soon as the Express stopped, Hagrid went forward to collect the first years. Harry and Ron moved among the alighting students, looking for their sisters and friends.

Suddenly, someone with a lot of red hair rammed into Harry, pulling him into a tight embrace. Harry was wondering how emotional his sister could get when the person pulled back. He was surprised to see that it was Ginny who had embraced him.

"Oops," Ginny said, her face almost as scarlet as her hair, "I thought you were Ron." She moved to her brother, embracing him almost as strongly.

Then, Rose came up and hugged Harry for a second, "What happened to you two, bro? We were worried when the train started pulling out without you two on board."

"We had some trouble with the barrier, sis," Harry said, "It's all right now. We got to Hogwarts okay." He then saw and heard Hagrid calling the first years, "You and Ginny better get over there with the other first years."

"All right, bro," she said, "See you later."

Harry watched the two redheads move off. Ginny hadn't looked at him again.

Hermione came over to them, followed by Neville. "What happened at King's Cross, Harry? Why did you and Ron fail to get on the train? Your sisters were really worried. It's a good thing we got a note by owl that you were all right and already at Hogwarts."

Harry and Ron told their two friends about the problem with the barrier.

"That's strange," Hermione said, "I've never read about that sort of thing happening to the barrier."

"Yes," Neville said, "It is strange. It's like someone didn't want the two of you from getting on the train."

"Who could have that kind of power?" Harry asked, "Why didn't he want us on the train?"

"That's a real mystery, Harry," Hermione said, "As soon as we have time, I'll start looking for spells that could do that." She glanced around, "But, right now, we better join the others for the ride to the castle."

"Ride to the castle?" Ron asked, "Don't tell me we're taking those boats again."

Hermione frowned, "If you've read *Hogwarts: a History* before, Ronald, you'd know that that's only for the first years. We're going by carriage. Come on, let's follow the others."

The four friends joined the older students walking out of the station. They soon spotted the carriages and wondered how they moved. They got into the last one and set off for the castle.

Later, as they sat at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, they watched the first years enter through the huge doors and stare in awe at the ceiling.

They listened to the Sorting Hat's song which was similar to the one they had heard the year before. They watched the sorting start.

Soon, they heard "Potter, Rose Lily" and watched Rose nervously approach the stool with the Sorting Hat. She sat down and the Hat was placed on her head by Professor McGonagall.

Two minutes passed and Harry started to get apprehensive. Then, the Hat said, "GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry breathed a sigh of relief and stood up as his sister ran up to their table. He hugged her and said, "Glad you could join us, sis."

"So am I," she said, smirking. Then she whispered to him, "You know that thing wanted to place me in Slytherin? I told it, no way, I want to be with my brother."

Harry chuckled, "You know what? It tried the same thing with me last year. Well, this proves we're siblings."

Rose laughed and slapped him on the arm. She sat down between him and Hermione. Then she saw Neville and her face became a little pink. Turning away, she watched the rest of the sorting.

When Ginny was called up to the Sorting Hat, it took it only ten seconds before saying "GRYFFINDOR!" She ran over to their table and sat down between Rose and Hermione.

The rest of the feast proceeded well. Soon, the students dispersed to head for their dormitories. Percy stood up at the Gryffindor table and led the first years off, Harry and his three friends followed at a leisurely pace. They stopped by the owlery to send an owl to Harry and Ron's parents with news of their safe arrival and their sisters' sorting into Gryffindor.

Later that night, as he lay in his bed, Harry wondered about the strange incident with the barrier. Neville's words came back to him.

Why would anyone want to keep him and Ron from getting on the Express? Was it to keep them from going back to Hogwarts?

Then he remembered all the mishaps they had that morning. It seemed that those incidents were delays to keep them from getting to the station on time. So, was he the real target and Ron got involved because they tried getting through the barrier together? Why? Did it have anything to do with Voldemort?

After the events of the last year, Harry was aware that Voldemort was around, waiting to come back. Was something going to happen in Hogwarts that someone didn't want him around? Harry decided he needed to keep his eyes open.

Chapter 10: More Marauders and a new tool

The next day, a few interesting things happened to Harry. First, while eating at breakfast, Harry was blinded by a bright flash in front of him. Looking up through the haze, he saw a small mousy-haired boy, holding a Muggle camera, one of the new first years. The younger boy smiled and introduced himself haltingly as Colin Creevey and added that he was in Gryffindor too. Colin then launched into a rambling monologue of how he had heard all about Harry and what he was in the wizarding world. Harry also learned that Colin was muggleborn and his dad was a milkman.

As Colin rambled on, Harry saw Rose and Ginny behind him, his sister snickering behind her hands and Ginny just smiling shyly. Harry had a feeling now as to who had supplied Colin with his information on Harry.

Finally, the two redhead girls gently pulled Colin back, telling him to have breakfast and he could see Harry later. Harry mumbled his thanks to them and went back to his breakfast. Glancing at Ron and Hermione, he noticed that they looked amused. Harry told them to sod off. That merely caused Ron to laugh.

After a few minutes later, looking up at the Head Table, he was surprised to see Gilderoy Lockhart sitting there in a chair that had been empty the night before. He was even more surprised when Dumbledore announced that Lockhart was the new Defense against the Dark Arts professor. Harry snorted and wondered what his parents would say if they knew, especially his dad. At least, from the schedules McGonagall had distributed earlier, he wouldn't have that class until that afternoon.

Later, while going to lunch after morning classes, Harry was walking behind Ron and Hermione when he was pulled from behind into a classroom. Harry spun around and pulled his wand out, pointing it at two surprised tall redheads.

"Whoa, Harry," one said.

"Easy there," the other said.

"It's just us," they said together.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, "Whew, don't do that, Fred, George."

The Weasley twins smirked, "A bit nervous, aren't you?"

"Just being careful, especially after last year," he said.

"That's all right," they said.

"So, what do I owe this honor of being pulled into an empty classroom by you two?" Harry asked.

"We just wanted to know when we, as in the New Marauders, will start a new round of pranks," one of the twins, probably Fred, said, "We couldn't ask you earlier since Mum and your Mum were always around."

"Why leave it to me to decide this?" Harry asked them, "You two are older. You should be the leaders."

"Harry, Harry, Harry," Fred said.

"Your Dad was the..." George said.

"...acknowledged leader of the original Marauders." Fred said.

"It's only fair that you be ours." George said.

"All right, in that case," Harry said, his hand gripping his chin, "give it a few weeks for the school to settle down. How about we set something small up in the first week of October then plan something larger for the Halloween Feast?"

The twins grinned, "All right, Harry. We guess we can wait that long. See ya around." They left the classroom first. Harry followed them after a half-minute.

When he arrived at the Great Hall, he joined Ron and Hermione in the middle of the Gryffindor table.

"Where've you been?" Hermione asked. Ron merely cocked an eyebrow at him, his mouth full of food at the moment.

Harry smiled and said in a low voice, "I just had a little chat with Fred and George."

Ron swallowed then grinned. "I bet I know what they wanted, Harry. So, what did you tell them?"

Hermione frowned, "Does this have to do with pranks again?"

Ron looked at her, "Come on, Hermione. Don't tell me you didn't have fun last term when we did those pranks?"

"That's not the point, Ron," she said, annoyed a bit, "It's against the rules to do pranks. We're lucky we weren't caught doing that."

Harry spoke up, "Still, Hermione, you can't deny that it was fun doing them and you did laugh with the rest of us at the results."

Hermione attempted to frown but then a small smile broke out of her face, "All right, it **was** fun planning them and exciting laying them. The results **were** quite funny."

"There, see, it wasn't bad admitting that," Ron said, smirking. He turned back to Harry, "So, mate, what did you tell the twins?"

"I said that we'll start the first week of October." Harry said, "Maybe we can plan something for the Halloween Feast."

"Wicked!" Ron said.

"Umm, what do you two think about including Neville in our little group?" Harry asked.

Ron frowned while Hermione looked thoughtful.

"I don't know, Harry," Ron said, "you think he'll go for something like this?"

"Well, he did seem to enjoy the results last term," Hermione said, "But won't a larger group increase our chances of getting caught?"

"I considered it since I'd like to be closer friends with him," Harry said, "I mean, he did help us last June with the Stone and all. He may know some other stuff that can help us with any pranks we plan." When the two seemed unconvinced, he added, "I'll try and sound him out, okay? I'll also ask Fred and George their opinion, all right?"

The two nodded and the three friends turned back to their lunch.

Their first class in Defense against the Dark Arts was outrageous. Lockhart actually gave them a test on their knowledge of his books. Not surprisingly, Hermione got the highest score. Then, the class descended into pandemonium when Lockhart released a cage full of Cornish pixies. Most of the class fled together with Lockhart, leaving the trio to deal with the pixies, which they did, mostly due to Hermione's efforts.

Later that night, Harry found himself cornered by Rose and Ginny near the fireplace of the nearly empty Gryffindor Common Room.

"Um, hi, sis," Harry said nervously, "How was your first day?"

"It was great," Rose answered. Then she pushed him into a nearby armchair and placed her arms on the chair's arms. "I heard Fred and George had a little talk with you at lunchtime, something about pranking."

Harry gulped, "Um, where did you hear that?"

Rose smiled deviously and looked at Ginny for an instant, "Now, that's our secret, big brother. The thing is we, Ginny and I, want in, in your little group." She looked again at Ginny, "What did they call themselves? Oh yeh, the New Marauders."

Harry's eyes widened. How did she know that? The twins had only come up with the name that lunchtime.

"Well, big brother?" Rose asked, "What will it be?"

"Well, you see, sis," Harry said, "I'll have to ask the others."

“What for, Harry?” Rose asked, “I’d say they’d choose you as the leader because of Dad.”

Ginny nodded her head.

Harry sighed, “Okay, it’s true that they’re calling me the leader. But, this is a team effort, so any decision to increase the number of the group needs the others knowing it.”

“Oh, all right,” Rose said, “I’m sure Fred and George wouldn’t mind letting us in. They appreciate our devious minds.” Harry mentally agreed, having been a victim of a few things these two had cooked up over the years. “Hermione would be glad to have two more girls in the group,” Rose said, “Now, Ron, he may be a problem. But I’m sure we can persuade him.” The two redhead females now exchanged evil smirks that sent shivers up Harry’s spine.

“All right, sis,” Harry said, “I’ll ask the others tomorrow.”

Rose and Ginny smiled at him and Rose said, “Okay, bro. See you in the morning.”

As the three moved towards the stairs to the dormitories, Harry said, “Oh, by the way, I’m also thinking of asking Neville Longbottom to join us.”

Rose stopped suddenly and turned back to Harry, eyes wide. She turned around again and mumbled back, “Oh, sure, Harry.” She then ascended the stairs to the girls’ dorms at a run, Ginny on her heels.

Harry stood there for a moment, wondering about his sister’s reaction before resuming his climb to his own dormitory. He found Ron already asleep, snoring heavily and decided to leave telling him to the next day, together with the others.

The next morning, as they were dressing, Harry told Ron that the New Marauders would need to meet together right after dinner. When Ron asked why, Harry simply told him to wait for the meeting. Ron looked suspiciously at him for a minute but his grumbling stomach made him want to go to breakfast.

At the breakfast table, Harry managed to slip a note to the twins about the meeting. He greeted his sister and Ginny but gave no indication of anything out of the ordinary.

Harry told Hermione about the meeting while walking to their first class. The bushy-haired brunette frowned but said nothing.

Later, after dinner, the five Gryffindors met in an empty classroom.

“So, Harry,” Fred said as soon as they had all sat down, “what’s this meeting for? I didn’t think we’d be planning something this early.”

“Um, no. Actually, I asked us to meet together since I was deciding on adding a few more people to our group.”

“Who, Harry?” Ron said, his eyes narrowing.

“Yes, Harry,” Hermione said, “It’s hard enough with five of us. Having more people may increase our chances of getting caught. Plus, we’re asking other students to break rules.”

Harry looked at the other four New Marauders then said, “Well, I was thinking of asking Ginny and Rose as well as Neville Longbottom to join us.”

Almost immediately, the other four reacted differently.

“What!” Ron said, “Ginny and Rose? Why do we need two more girls?”

Hermione had smiled and said, “Oh, good.” Then she had frowned as she heard what Ron said.

The twins had broken into grins and said simply, “Brilliant! Those girls are awesome planners.”

Hermione turned to Ron, “What have you against girls, Ron? In case you haven’t noticed, I’m one.”

Ron turned red, “Um, I know that, Hermione. But this is different.”

“How is it different?” Hermione asked, her arms crossed over her chest.

“Well,” Ron said, “It’s Ginny and Rose.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow, “And?”

“What?” Ron said, “Those two are monsters.”

Fred and George placed a hand on their younger brother’s shoulders. “They’re also very good at thinking of pranks and spells, Ron. Almost as good as Hermione they are.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow, “Really?”

The twins turned to her. “Oh yeah,” Fred said, nodding.

“Quite good,” George said, “It’s scary sometimes.”

“So, guys,” Harry said, calling their attention back to him, “what’ll it be?”

“Well, Harry,” Fred said, “we’re...”

“...Okay with our sister and yours, joining,” George said.

Harry turned to Hermione who said, “It’s fine with me.”

Harry turned to his other best friend, “Ron?”

Ron scowled then said, “Oh, all right. They can join. But, I’m not going with them under the cloak.”

Harry smiled, “Good, now about Neville?”

Fred asked, “Are you sure about him, Harry?”

“Yeah,” George said, “At least our sisters had an inkling of what we were up to.”

"Well, he did drop hints he suspected us of doing the pranks that night we went after the Stone," Harry said, "He helped us that night and his parents were in school with Mum and Dad."

"Have you talked to him about it, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Well, not yet," Harry admitted, "I was just considering it after my birthday."

"Then, why do we have to decide tonight?" Ron asked.

Harry said, "Oh, all right. I'll talk to him first then we can meet. That way, Ginny and Rose can help us decide."

They then left the classroom and made their way back to Gryffindor tower before curfew. Once back in their Common room, Harry waited until he saw the two female redheads. He beckoned to them to move over to a secluded corner of the room. Once there, he motioned to them to sit down.

"Well?" Rose asked him, in a low tone, "What did they say?"

"About what, sis?" Harry asked, an innocent look on his face.

Rose sighed. "About us joining you?" she said, "Look, we know you five met together. We saw you enter that empty classroom."

Harry's eyebrows shot up to his fringe, "How did you two know? We were careful not to be followed."

Rose smirked again, "You'll find out, if you let us join you."

Harry stared at his sister and her best friend. "Oh, all right. No need to hold you in suspense any longer." He paused for a moment, then smiled, "You're both in."

Rose squealed and hugged him while Ginny smiled, "Thank you, thank you, big brother. You won't regret it."

"I better not," Harry said, "Now, what's your big secret?"

Rose and Ginny exchanged smirks, then pulled out a folded piece of parchment. Harry raised one eyebrow, "A blank piece of parchment?"

Rose was still smirking, "Watch and learn, big brother." She took out her wand, pointed it at the parchment and said, "I swear I am up to no good."

Writing appeared on the parchment – *Prongs, Padfoot, Moony and Wormtail proudly presents the MARAUDER'S MAP*. Rose opened it and a map of some sort was formed with moving squiggles and names all over it.

Harry's eyebrows disappeared in his hair, "What is this? Where did you get this?"

Rose was now grinning, "It's a birthday present from Dad. It's called the Marauder's Map." She proceeded to explain the map's workings to him. She and Ginny had first looked at it last night and had been fascinated with it.

"Remember, we left the Great Hall tonight after dinner before you did." Rose said.

"We moved to a bathroom on the first floor and looked into it," Ginny said, in a softer voice than usual.

"That's how we saw you enter the classroom," Rose said, "We knew then that you were talking about us."

Harry smiled, "Well, now that can be really useful. All right, we're laying low for now, but I think we should do something for the Halloween Feast. Think about it and give me some suggestions, okay?"

Rose and Ginny exchanged calculating looks, "All right, Harry," Rose said, "We'll let you know what we come up with." The two redheads left for their dorms.

Harry shook his head. Leave it up to his dad and his surrogate uncles to come up with something like that. Now, they wouldn't be caught as

they'd be able to spot Filch or any teachers going around the school at night.

Chapter 11: Another New Marauder and a schoolwide prank

It wasn't until a week later that Harry managed to get Neville alone. After a Herbology class, Neville lingered to ask Professor Sprout about something and Harry simply waited for him to come out of Greenhouse 3.

"Hey, Neville," Harry said, "Got a minute? There's something I need to ask you."

"Sure, Harry," the pudgy boy said, "What is it?"

"Well," Harry said, lowering his voice, "You remember the strange things that happened to the Slytherins and Snape last term?"

Neville grinned, "Oh yeah, really hilarious, especially when they were pink. What about it?"

"Well, those were pranks and I happen to know who was responsible for it," Harry said.

Neville's grin widened, "Oh, is that so? Now, that you've confirmed that they were pranks, I have an idea who was responsible for them."

Harry also grinned, "I believe you do. I knew you'd figure it out, especially with your parents both being Aurors."

"Let me guess, Harry," Neville said, "It's you, Ron and his twin brothers."

"Good guess, Nev," Harry said, "Of course, you're short one person from that group."

Neville raised one eyebrow, "Who?"

Harry grinned again, "Who is one of the, if not the, smartest witch in our year?"

Both of Neville's eyebrows rose to his hairline, "Hermione? Wow, I never would have guessed that she'd be a prankster. I thought she was a stickler for the rules."

Harry said, "Ordinarily yes, but she understands the need for a bit of fun, harmless fun, every now and then."

"So, why are you telling me this, Harry?" Neville asked.

"Well, I, with the agreement of the rest, wanted to know if you'd like to join our little group and get in the fun."

"Wow," Neville grinned again, "I sure would, Harry."

"Great, mate," Harry said, grinning again "Oh, by the way, we have two other new members."

"Who are they?" Neville asked, though the look on his face seemed to hint that he had an idea who they were.

"Two first years with whom you are acquainted with already." Harry answered, "Rose and Ginny."

"I knew it," Neville said, "From what I saw of those two this past summer, they'd want in on something like this. So what do you guys call yourself, I mean, you must have a name of some sort."

"We call ourselves the New Marauders; after all, we're just continuing the tradition of my Dad and his friends who were the original Marauders when they were here."

"Good name," Neville said, "so when do we start?"

"Well, I was thinking of doing something for during the Halloween Feast, something affecting the whole school, even us. I asked Rose and Ginny for ideas. We'll probably meet for it in a couple of weeks."

"All right, Harry. Just let me know."

The two boys started walking back to the castle for lunch, turning their conversation to other things.

The weeks passed with the routine of classes, homework and meals. It got a bit more hectic for Harry as Oliver Wood seemed even more determined to win the Quidditch Cup. The last game the previous

year between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw had taken place while Harry was unconscious in the hospital wing, thus, the Gryffindor team had lost badly.

Unfortunately, they discovered that the Slytherin team had acquired new broomsticks, the Nimbus two thousand and ones, which was better than even Harry's Nimbus thousand that he got from his parents the previous year. This pushed Wood to schedule numerous practice sessions.

In spite of his obsessed Quidditch captain, Harry managed to get the New Marauders to meet in the first Sunday of October, in an empty classroom on the third floor, near the room where Fluffy used to be kept.

Rose showed the Marauder's Map to the rest of the group, who were impressed with it, even Hermione, though she was suspicious of the type of magic needed to create it. The twins commented that if they had had it, they would not have been caught as much by Filch for their pranking in their first two years.

The New Marauders spent almost two hours throwing ideas back and forth for their Halloween prank. Finally deciding on what to do, Harry divided the responsibility for the different aspects of the prank. They met one more Sunday evening to finalize what would happen.

Halloween night saw the Great Hall decorated with the live bats and Hagrid's huge pumpkins carved into lanterns. Golden plates were on the table and the Hall was lighted by hundreds of golden candles.

The students entered the Hall in high spirits and gaiety. After they had settled into their seats at their House tables, Professor Dumbledore gave a short speech then said, "Tuck in."

The students immediately began eating the wonderful spread on the table. There were all sorts of dishes, including Harry's favorites like steak and kidney pie. Ron, as usual, was stuffing his face. Harry noted that Ginny was eating almost as much as her brother, though with more finesse.

Near the end of the feast, candies of all sorts appeared on the table in the golden trays. As the students ate the different candies, they started to change.

The Ravenclaws turned blue with beaks for noses and yellow feathers instead of hair. Their voices became bird squawks and chirps. Some even had their feet turn into bird's feet.

The Hufflepuffs turned yellow, grew whiskers and black and white fur on their faces and their noses became black buttons. Their voices became squeaky and high pitched.

The Slytherins' skin turned into green scales and their hair turned into writhing snakes like medusas. When they opened their mouths, forked tongues would flick out.

The Gryffindors turned golden with reddish manes growing on their heads. They also had long lion tails. When they tried to talk, all that came out were lion roars.

Pandemonium broke out in the Great Hall as students realized what was happening. The eight Gryffindors who formed the New Marauders were laughing, their laughter disguised by lion roars.

Harry looked at the Head table to see the reactions of the teachers. Dumbledore was smiling with a twinkle in his eyes. McGonagall's lips were pressed tightly together, but every now, there was a slight upturn of her mouth. Snape looked furious and was glaring around. Hagrid, Flitwick and Sprout were laughing hard. Filch was glaring furiously around and seemed to be muttering to himself.

After about ten minutes, the students all turned to normal and started to settle down. A large banner suddenly unfurled above the doors, which read:

TONIGHT'S ENTERTAINMENT WAS BROUGHT TO . YOU BY THE
NEW MARAUDERS.

TRICK OR TREAT

HAPPY HALLOWEEN!

Most of the students were now on their feet, laughing and clapping. The exceptions, of course, were a few Slytherins like Draco Malfoy who was scowling. Harry felt an urge to bow but restrained it. He exchanged grins with Ron, Neville and the twins. Ginny and Rose were laughing hysterically. Even Hermione looked pleased.

Harry looked back at the Head table. Snape still looked mad and was now glaring at the Gryffindor table. Of course he would know who the Marauders were, having gone to school with them and been subjected to their pranks. Dumbledore stood up, a smile on his aged face.

"Well, that was quite entertaining," he said, eyes twinkling, "I see we have a new group of pranksters in Hogwarts. I do hope they refrain from disrupting classes. Now, I'm sure you are all tired from the feast and the events of the last few minutes, so please head back to your dormitories for a good night's rest. Good night."

The students all got up and headed for the doors, talking and laughing. Harry and his friends managed to bunch together as they walked to Gryffindor Tower. They gradually slowed down and drifted to the rear of the crowd, allowing the other students to get ahead of them. Finally, they stopped and sneaked into an empty classroom.

Once inside, Fred drew his wand and cast a Locking and a Silencing charm on the door. Then, they all burst out into laughter.

"That was great," Neville said, in between bursts of laughter.

"Yeah," Ron said, grinning, "That was one of the best pranks yet."

"And we owe it all," Fred said.

"To our three lovely mates," George finished.

Hermione, Ginny and Rose were now blushing.

"Yeah," Harry said, smiling at the three girls, "you three were brilliant thinking up this stuff. "

"Well, me and Ginny just thought about what we want to happen. Hermione came up with the spells," Rose said.

"And brilliant spells they were," Harry said.

"Well," Hermione said, still blushing, "you guys did a brilliant job of casting them on the sweets and tables."

Fred and George broke into huge grins, then started bowing to the girls, saying over and over, "Thank you, thank you." Harry, Ron and Neville, on the other hand, were blushing and smiling shyly at the compliment.

"Thanks, Hermione," Neville said.

"Well, my fellow Marauders," Fred said.

"It's been a fun evening," George said.

"But, the two of us," Fred said.

"And our favorite seeker," George said.

"Have practice bright and early tomorrow," they both said, turning to Harry.

Harry scowled. Just leave it up to Wood to schedule a practice the day after a great feast.

The Marauders reluctantly left the classroom after Rose took a look at the Marauder's Map to make sure no professors or Filch were around. They climbed the last staircase to Gryffindor Tower. Upon entering the now empty common room, they proceeded to their dormitories after bidding each other a goodnight.

Before he drifted off to sleep, Harry wondered how his team would manage to beat the Slytherin team on their speedy brooms.

Chapter 12: A Strange visitor

Harry woke up suddenly in pitch darkness and felt pain in his arm, like a lot of splinters were embedded in it. For a moment, he wondered where he was. Then, he remembered the events of the day.

It was the first Quidditch match of the season, Gryffindor versus Slytherin. With their new brooms, Slytherin's chasers were running rings around the Gryffindor team. Harry desperately sought out the snitch, hoping to end the game before their opponents got too much of a lead. Then, he had to dodge a bludger. As he sped away from it, he looked over his shoulder and was surprised to see it turn around and head back his way. At first, Fred and George tried to run interference with the bludger, but Harry told them to let him deal with the strangely acting bludger since the distraction of the Gryffindor beaters allowed the Slytherins to score again and again.

Harry did a lot of fancy maneuvers to avoid the bludger. Then, he spent an extra second floating still in the air as he had spotted the snitch hovering above Draco Malfoy, the new Slytherin seeker, and the rogue bludger slammed into his right arm, breaking it. In spite of the intense pain this caused, Harry still managed to catch the snitch from under Malfoy's nose, though he ended up on the ground.

Unfortunately for Harry, among the first people to reach him was Gilderoy Lockhart, who apparently had a fantasy to be the school nurse. Before Madame Pomfrey could reach Harry, Lockhart had cast a spell which relieved Harry of the pain and, unfortunately, of all the bones in the injured arm. Madame Pomfrey was quite upset with this and had Harry brought to the Hospital Wing where he would have to rest the night while his bones were regrown. The potion was vile tasting and its effects were quite painful.

Now that he remembered where he was, Harry looked around, trying to figure out what had awoken him. The pain was actually only a twinge now. He reached for his glasses on the side table with his uninjured arm. As the room sharpened into focus, he sat up and looked around again.

He was surprised to see a pair of large tennis ball sized eyes staring at him from the next bed. It was a house elf, similar in appearance to

Blinky or Mimi, but this one was dressed in an old pillow case. From what Harry had learned about house elves from his parents and their own house elves, this may mean he was an enslaved house elf.

“Um, hello,” Harry said, “What’s your name?”

The house elf’s eyes bulged out as if surprised. “Harry Potter talked to me,” it said in a squeaky voice, “The great Harry Potter said hello and asked me my name.” It then lowered its head into its hands and burst into tears

Harry’s eyes widened in surprise, “I, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

The house elf looked up and sniffed, “Oh, no, sir. Harry Potter didn’t upset Dobby but bestowed a great honor on Dobby who is crying with joy.”

“Oh, I see. So, your name is Dobby, right?”

“Yes, Harry Potter, sir. I is Dobby.”

“Well, then, Dobby, why are you here? Are you one of the Hogwarts house elves?”

“Oh, no, Harry Potter, sir. Dobby is not fortunate enough to be bound to work here. Dobby is bound to a wizard family and must serve them until his death.”

Harry felt a twinge of sadness as his suspicions about the house elf’s status were confirmed. He didn’t want anyone to be like that. He was just glad Blinky and his family were free elves and chose to work for his family of their own free will.

“Well, then, Dobby,” Harry said in a kind tone, “why are you here, visiting me?”

“Dobby just wanted to make sure Harry Potter was all right, after that bludger had hit him. Dobby didn’t mean for Harry Potter to get hurt like this. Dobby thought Harry Potter wouldn’t come back here when he missed the train.”

“Hang on,” Harry said, his eyes wide, anger starting to rise within him, “you set that bludger on me? You also stopped Ron and me from getting through the barrier? Why?”

Dobby now looked miserable. “Dobby just wanted Harry Potter to stay home. Dobby wanted Harry Potter to be safe. If you stay here, you will be in mortal danger, Harry Potter.”

“What danger, Dobby?” Harry asked, still angry, “What kind of danger is worse than you almost getting me killed by that bludger?”

Dobby moved closer to Harry until he was right beside him. “There is a plot, Harry Potter, a plot to cause evil things to happen here, in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year.”

“What evil thing, Dobby?” Harry said, “Who’s plotting them?”

Dobby made a choking sound then grabbed the water jug at the side table and started hitting himself with it.

Harry was appalled for a moment, then he grabbed the jug, “Stop it, Dobby. What are you doing?”

“I was punishing myself, Harry Potter, sir. I almost spoke ill of the family I serve.”

“Oh, then someone from that family is involved in this plot you’re talking of. Which family do you serve?”

Dobby made another choking sound, then he started thumping his head on the side of the table.

Harry grabbed one of Dobby’s shoulders with his uninjured arm and shook him. “Okay, okay, I understand. You can’t tell me. At least, give me an idea on what the plot is about.”

Dobby looked miserable again and shook his head.

Harry sighed in frustration. “Wait a minute, this plot doesn’t have anything to do with Volde-,” seeing Dobby wince, he said, “sorry, You-Know-Who, does it?”

Dobby slowly shook his head, "Oh, no, not *He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named*." His eyes, however, were very wide, as if he was hinting at something. Harry couldn't figure out what he meant.

"Well, then," Harry said, "Who-," Just then, a light came on in the Hallway. Dobby snapped a finger and just vanished. Right after, Madame Pomfrey came into the ward, holding a candle, and looked over at Harry. "Are you awake already, Mr. Potter?"

"Um, just a bit," Harry replied, "My arm still twinges a little."

Madame Pomfrey came up to his bed and gave him a small smile, "Well, it won't do that anymore after another hour or two. Now, go on back to sleep."

Harry placed his glasses on the table and turned over. However, sleep failed to claim him for a few more hours as he pondered his conversation with Dobby. He'd have to tell the others about it in the morning.

The next day, Madame Pomfrey let Harry go before breakfast, with the admonishment not to do anything strenuous with the reknitted arm for a few more days.

It was after dinner when Harry finally found time to talk to his friends about Dobby. He pulled Ron, Hermione and Neville into another empty classroom right from the Great Hall.

Just before Harry could say something, the door opened and Rose and Ginny peaked in.

"What are you four doing here?" Rose asked, "Are you guys planning another prank without us?"

"No, we are not," Ron said, "Go on and leave us. This is something entirely different."

"Ron, wait," Harry said, "That's my sister and yours. I think they should hear this, too. If I'm in danger, then so are you and them, too."

"Fine, fine." Ron said.

After Harry had told them all that Dobby had said, he looked from one to the other. "So, what do you guys think?"

"Hmm," Hermione said, looking thoughtful, "That's strange, Harry. I don't know much about house elves. Is that the way they really are?"

"Well, Hermione," Ron said, "Most families who have house elves are very rich and very old. Ordinarily, house elves can't say anything bad about the family they work for, otherwise, they have to punish themselves."

Hermione looked horrified, "That's terrible. Why doesn't anyone do anything about it?"

Harry looked uncomfortable, "Look, Hermione, you've met Blinky and his family. According to him, it was much worse before my baby self beat old Volde, er, I mean, You-Know-Who."

"Yes, Hermione," Rose said, "Mimi told me that before my big brother zapped the Big Bad, most house elves were beaten and were virtually slaves. Now, many of them, like Blinky and his family, get paid for their work and get holidays. But, still, some of them are still treated like slaves."

"So, do you think Dobby was on the up and up?" Ron asked.

"Maybe," Harry said, "Something is definitely up. I don't know what kind of danger could there be here at Hogwarts. I mean, Professor Dumbledore is here. I can't imagine what he couldn't handle."

"Well, bro, this has been interesting," Rose said, looking at her watch, "but I've got to run."

"Where are you going at this late hour, sis?" Harry asked.

"Um, she's got detention with Snape," Ginny said, a grimace forming on her face.

Harry scowled, "Whatever for?"

Ginny looked at Rose who looked back at her and shook her head.

Harry moved closer to her sister and asked again, "What's the detention for, Rose?"

After a few seconds of silence, Rose sighed and said, "One of the Slytherins, Margaret Tunnelbee tripped while taking her potion sample to Snape's desk. She dropped the vial and it broke. She claimed that I tripped her since it happened while she was passing my desk."

"So, I guess you didn't do that, right?" Harry asked.

"I certainly didn't, though I was tempted to hex her since she'd been making snide remarks about the potion me and Ginny had been brewing," Rose said, "Anyway, Snape believed her and took 10 points from Gryffindor. I tried to protest and said I was innocent, but he just took 10 more points and gave me three days detention for it."

All the people in the room scowled.

"That git, so typical of him," Harry said, angrily, "It wasn't so bad when it was me he was being unfair with. But now, he's doing it to my sister. I should complain to Dumbledore for this."

Rose put her hand on his shoulder, "It's okay, bro. I can handle this. Dad warned me he might get a bit hard on me because of their shared past. Don't worry."

Harry sighed, "Okay, sis. But we'll get back at him for this." He looked to the other marauders, "I think we should start planning another prank, for the Slytherins."

Everyone nodded. Then, they all left for the Gryffindor common room, except for Rose who moved in the direction of the Dungeons.

Chapter 13: The Voice and the Chamber

The next night, after curfew, Harry and Ron sneaked out of Gryffindor Tower in Harry's invisible cloak and headed for the Dungeons. Unfortunately, Ron tripped on the hem of the cloak and caused them to crash into a suit of armor on the second floor. Harry just managed to throw the cloak off of them and into an alcove when Filch came running up.

The caretaker was practically smiling when he dragged them to McGonagall's quarters. Their head of house was not pleased to be awoken at that hour. When asked why they were sneaking around, Harry told her that they just wanted a midnight snack. McGonagall looked unconvinced but dismissed them after she told them to see her after dinner the next evening for their detentions. Filch made it a point to escort them to their common room.

The two boys were quite glum the next day as they wondered what kind of detention they would receive. Their fellow Marauders tried their best but not even Fred or George could cheer them up. Even Ron was not hungry at dinner that night.

When the rest of the students got up to go back to their dormitories, Ron and Harry said their goodbyes to their friends and slowly walked to McGonagall's office. Harry knocked on the door and they entered when bade to do so.

"All right, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley," the elderly woman said, "I have considered your detention for last night's breaking of curfew. I know growing boys need their nourishment but that doesn't excuse sneaking around. Now, Mr. Weasley, you will go with Mr. Filch to the Trophy room and polish all the awards there, by hand, no magic."

Ron gulped and looked at Filch who was almost smiling, his arms filled with rags and one hand holding a bottle of metal polish.

Just then, another knock was heard on the door. Filch opened it and stepped back, revealing Lockhart at the door.

"Ah, Minerva," he said, his usual smile on his face, "I gather that you've told Mr. Potter what his detention is."

Harry felt a sense of dread creep up his spine.

“No, Gilderoy,” McGonagall said, a sigh escaping her lips, “I was just about to.”

“Oh,” Lockhart said, “Let me be the one, then.” Without waiting for a reply from the older woman, he approached Harry. “Harry, my boy. Your detention this evening is to help me answer some of my fanmail.” He drew even closer to Harry, who had a look of horror on his face. Lockhart apparently misinterpreted the look as some form of joy. “Yes, yes, I know. It seems a bit inappropriate for a detention. But I had to take this opportunity to let you have a glimpse of the price of fame and maybe practice when you get your own fanmail.” He placed an arm on Harry’s shoulder and started to lead him to the door. “Come, come. We mustn’t waste any more time.”

Harry looked back at Ron, his eyes pleading. Ron just shrugged his shoulders though a faint smile could be seen forming at the corner of his mouth. Harry frowned and vowed to tell Ron off later.

It was two hours later as he was writing down addresses of Lockhart’s fans on envelopes that Harry heard the voice for the first time.

It was a voice that chilled one’s bones, filled with ice-cold venom. It was asking someone to come to it, to allow it to kill, tear and rip apart whoever it was calling.

Apparently, Lockhart hadn’t heard the voice, but he quickly dismissed Harry when he noticed the time. Harry gratefully left Lockhart’s office for Gryffindor tower.

Later, in their dormitory, Harry interrupted Ron’s rant about polishing trophies and awards multiple times to tell him what he had heard. It seemed Ron couldn’t explain the voice either. Harry fell asleep wondering where the voice had come from.

Later in the week, Harry and Ron successfully managed to get into Snape’s private quarters undetected. They managed to change the color of Snape’s robes to pink. Unfortunately for the Potions Master, it was invisible to him. The Slytherins were too nervous to tell him while

the other houses simply snickered behind his back. It was Professor Dumbledore who informed him of his robe's new color during lunch, causing Snape to disappear for the rest of the day. Needless to say, he was meaner to the other houses for the rest of the week.

Two weeks passed without incident. Then, one evening in the last week of November, Harry was sitting down to dinner between Ron and Hermione after being held back by Lockhart for almost a half-hour. Harry saw Fred and George seated nearby, conversing with another Gryffindor fourth year, Lee Jordan. However, he did not see any other redheads at their table.

He turned to Colin Creevey who was seated across from him. "Hey, Colin," he said, "have you seen Rose and Ginny? They're usually the first down here among you lot."

"The last I saw of them was in Potions, Harry," the younger boy said, his voice filled with awe as Harry seldom talked to him.

Harry frowned and turned to look at the Head Table. Snape was also missing from his customary place. Harry wondered what the Potions teacher was doing with his sister and friend. Sighing, he turned to eat, knowing he couldn't do a thing about it for now.

As the minutes ticked by, Harry started to feel nervous. He wondered again what Snape was doing to the two girls. Finally, he took a last gulp of pumpkin juice and stood up.

Ron looked at him with an eyebrow raised, "Are you done already, Harry?" he asked.

"I can't eat, Ron," Harry replied, "I'm worried about Rose and Ginny not showing up yet for dinner. You heard Colin. Who knows what Snape is up to. I've got to go find them."

Ron sighed, "Oh, all right. I'll come with you. After all, it's my sister, too."

Hermione said, "Wait, I'll come, too."

The three friends left the Great Hall and headed for the Dungeons. They could not have predicted the events that followed.

Later that night, they were in an empty classroom, discussing the events of the previous two hours.

Harry had heard the same cold, murderous voice he had heard in Lockhart's office. He had gone running after it, heedless of his friend's calls to wait for them and his sister, who they passed in the first floor. Harry had followed the voice to a second floor corridor which was partly flooded. It was Hermione who pointed out the foot-high words in blood splashed on the wall, between two windows, proclaiming that "the Chamber of Secrets had been opened" and warning "enemies of the Heir". Then, they noticed Mrs. Norris, Filch's cat hanging suspended in front of the words.

As they were looking at the cat, the rest of the school had come by on their way back to their dormitories. The students had stopped in shock and stared at the wall. Filch had been terribly upset, trying to blame Harry, but Dumbledore took matters into his own hands and took Harry, Ron and Hermione to Lockhart's classroom for questioning with Snape, McGonagall and Filch coming along.

Dumbledore had explained that the cat was merely petrified. Fortunately for Mrs. Norris, the second years had been working on mandrakes in Herbology, which were cures for petrification if chopped up once mature. Unfortunately, that would take a few more months for the mandrakes to mature. Filch was not happy.

After making sure the three Gryffindors knew nothing about the cause of the cat's petrification or the writing on the wall, Dumbledore had dismissed them.

Now, Hermione and Ron advised Harry not to mention the voices he claimed to have heard, which they had not heard.

"Do you think this Chamber of Secrets is what Dobby was talking about, Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged, "Maybe. It seems terrible enough. Have you heard about it?"

"I think so," Ron said, his face scrunched up as he thought about it, "I think someone mentioned something about a secret chamber here at Hogwarts. It might have been Bill."

"Well," Hermione said, "Maybe I can find something on it in *Hogwarts: a History*. I had to leave my copy in order to fit all of Lockhart's books in my trunk, but I'm sure there are several copies in the library."

Ron and Harry exchanged amused glances, knowing that it was Hermione's favorite book. They knew she had read it cover to cover, probably the only person they knew who had.

"Um, we better get back to the common room," Ron said, "It's getting late."

Harry slapped his forehead, "Bloody hell, I forgot about Rose." He quickly left the classroom, ignoring Hermione's admonishment about language, and almost ran back to Gryffindor Tower.

Once there, he looked around and then breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Rose seated near the fireplace, talking to Fred and George. The common room was deserted except for the three redheads

He immediately moved in front of her. "Where the hell have you been?" he asked.

Rose turned around and glared at him, "Oh, thanks so much for your concern, Harry. It sure didn't look like it when you tore past me like Snape was after you."

Harry gulped then raised his hands in supplication as he attempted to placate his tempestuous sister. "Er, I did? Er, sorry, sis. Umm, well, umm."

Hermione sighed, "You did pass by her, Harry, while following that voice you heard."

"What voice?" Rose asked.

Harry sighed, "Okay, you three, none of this is repeated to anyone else, understand?"

When the three redheads nodded, Harry told them about the voice.

Rose eyed him critically. "That's it. My brother's losing it."

"Hey!" Harry said, "I'm not imagining it and I'm not going crazy."

"Then why can't anyone else hear it?" Rose asked.

Harry sighed in frustration, "I don't know. The thing is, hearing that voice led me to that corridor."

"So, you think that..." Fred said.

"...the two things are related?" George said.

"It's definitely possible." Harry said, "I mean, it's too big a coincidence."

"Wait a minute, Harry," Rose said, "Do you think this is what that house elf, what's his name, was warning you about?"

"You mean, Dobby?" Hermione asked.

"Hmm," Harry said, a thoughtful look appearing on his face, "I think it's a possibility. We'll need to find out what the Chamber is about."

"We can start in the morning," Hermione said, "It's getting late."

They all got up and moved toward the stairs to the dorms. Then, Harry, who was in the front, stopped and turned around.

"Hey, sis, where were you earlier, during dinner," he said to Rose, "Where is Ginny, anyway? I'm surprised she isn't down here with you."

"Yeah," Ron said, "she wasn't at dinner."

Rose's face turned stormy. "I was in the Potions classroom. That crone, Margaret Tunnelbee, spilled her sample again. She wasn't anywhere near me so Snape couldn't blame me directly but he made me help her clean it up. Ginny came back here, saying she had a

headache and wasn't feeling hungry. I guess she's already in bed." She turned to Ron, "Don't worry. I'll let you know if she's not okay."

"Wait a minute, sis," Harry said, "did you have any dinner?"

"Well, not really," Rose said, "After the awful stink of that potion, I wasn't too hungry. Unfortunately, now I am."

"All right," Harry said, "Come on, I'll just get my cloak and you get the map. We can sneak down to the Kitchens."

The others said their good nights as they went up the stairs to their respective dorms. Harry and Rose managed to get the house elves to give them a few sandwiches and a pitcher of pumpkin juice.

Over the next few days, Hogwarts was filled with tension. Hermione was frustrated when she found that all the copies of *Hogwarts: a History* had been checked out of the library.

However, she got Professor Binns to tell them about the Chamber of Secrets. This gave them the information that it supposedly had been created by Salazar Slytherin and housed some sort of monster that only he or his descendent/heir could control and could use to purge the school of those Slytherin thought unworthy to learn magic – muggleborns.

Then, Colin Creevey told them that several other students were thinking Harry was the Heir of Slytherin. Harry desperately hope that he wasn't. He knew his family had been in Gryffindor for generations. However, he had never known his entire family tree. He was, however, touched deeply when he heard that Rose had risen in defense of her older brother, even landing another detention with Snape for drawing her wand on some Slytherins in front of the Potions classroom.

Harry, Ron and Hermione tried to check the area where the writing was. Remembering the puddles of water, they found a bathroom nearby which could have been the source of the water. Hermione told the two boys that it was never used since it was haunted by a morose ghost named Moaning Myrtle. They looked around but found nothing unusual. However, outside, they noticed a group of spiders frantically

trying to pass through one small hole, like they were running from something. Harry smirked when Ron shuddered, since he knew his best friend was afraid of spiders.

Harry did notice that Ginny seemed to have been severely affected by what had happened to Mrs. Norris. She seemed less energetic and more subdued, very unlike the vibrant girl he had known for almost all his life. He didn't know how to raise her spirits. Not even planning a prank had enlivened her. He asked Rose about it but she just said that Ginny was stressed out by their classes.

Another odd thing occurred when Harry ran into Hagrid in the corridors. He had a couple of dead roosters in one hand. Hagrid attributed it to foxes or a Bugbear.

Harry tried to concentrate more on his studies and think less of Chamber and its secrets. However, he was worried. He was now sure that Dobby's warning was connected to the Chamber.

His feeling increased when he sat down to breakfast one day in the following week. He noticed that Colin Creevey was not at the Gryffindor table, trying to talk to him. Then, Dumbledore stood up and asked for everyone's attention.

"I regret to inform you that one of our students has been attacked," the headmaster said.

Gasps of shock reverberated throughout the Great Hall. Students looked at each other and many started asking who it was.

Dumbledore called for silence and continued speaking, "I'm afraid to inform you that Colin Creevey was found last night on the second floor, petrified like Mrs. Norris. He is now in the Hospital Wing. Anyone who would like to visit him may do so in their free time."

The Gryffindor table was stunned. Harry glanced at Ginny, who he knew sat beside the excitable boy in Charms. She seemed distraught and on the verge of tears. He placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed it. She looked up at him with a grateful smile then went back to picking through her food.

Rose also looked shocked but seemed to be able to control herself better. Harry repeated his gesture of support and she also smiled at him.

After that day, Harry noted that the first years were avoiding going around alone, often sticking together in groups.

A week after Colin had been found, Harry and Ron came into the entrance hall to find a crowd of students the notice board. Going closer, they saw a notice proclaiming the forming of a Dueling Club which would meet in two days in the Great Hall and a sign-up sheet beside it. Harry wondered who would lead the new club, hoping it would be Dumbledore. Two days later, he wasn't pleased to find that Lockhart was the one leading the club. It wasn't an enjoyable experience for Harry.

It had started well enough with Lockhart attempting to demonstrate a wizard duel with Snape. Then, Snape had suggested pairing Harry with Draco Malfoy. That's when it got bad.

Malfoy had conjured a snake which Lockhart attempted to blast it, only succeeding in sending it opposite Justin Finch-Fletchly, a Hufflepuff muggleborn. In a panic, Harry had shouted at the snake, telling it to back off. Unfortunately, instead of gratitude from Justin, Harry got a wild look from the other boy, who immediately ran from the Great Hall.

Ron had dragged Harry back to the Gryffindor common room. Once there, Harry turned around. He noticed that Hermione, Rose and Ginny were there also.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, "Why did Justin run away?"

"Harry, why didn't you tell us you're a Parselmouth," Ron asked.

"A Parselmouth!" Harry said, stunned. He knew what a Parselmouth was, having heard the term from his parents. "What do you mean? I just shouted at the snake. I don't know Parseltongue. I couldn't have talked to the snake."

Rose placed a hand on Harry's arm, "You did talk to it, bro, in some sort of hissing sounds."

"Yeah, mate," Ron said, "It was really weird. In fact, it seemed like you were, um, egging it on, like telling it to attack Justin."

Harry mouth dropped open. "No! I didn't. I was telling it to back off."

"You may have said that to it, Harry," Hermione said, "All we heard was the hissing."

Harry dropped into an armchair. He was still stunned about talking in a language he didn't know he could speak.

"This isn't good, Harry," Hermione said, "You do realize that Salazar Slytherin was a Parselmouth, too and that being one is rare, usually passed down from parent to child."

"Yeah," Ron said, "Now, the rest of the school will think you're his great-great-great-grandson or something."

"Hey," Rose said, "That can't be true. I mean, I'm Harry's sister. Yet, I couldn't understand what he was saying to the snake."

The others looked at her. Harry then broke into a smile.

"There, see," he said, "I can't be related to Slytherin. Otherwise, Rose would have the same ability."

Hermione sighed, "It's not that simple, Harry. Like other skills, being a Parselmouth may not be passed directly or shared by siblings. It could skip a generation or two."

"Well, there's only one way to clear that up," Harry said, "I'll have to ask Dad if we have a relation to Slytherin. But I'll do it over Christmas. It's only a week away."

Chapter 14: Chamber Secrets

Molly and Arthur Weasley had decided to visit Bill in Egypt during the Christmas Holidays. The five Weasley children at Hogwarts didn't want to go; Ron and Ginny didn't want to leave their friends, the twins thought Christmas was more fun in England and Percy wanted to keep his four younger siblings in line. So they were invited to spend the Christmas holidays at Potter Manor.

Rooming arrangements were made. Ron would share Harry's room and Ginny would share Rose's room. To his horror, Percy found himself sharing a guest room with the twins. His two youngest siblings had a good laugh when they found out, wondering what the twins would do to their perfect older brother.

The holidays proved to be the ideal break for Ron, Harry and their sisters. Away from Hogwarts and the reminder of the Chamber, they had time to enjoy themselves. Harry noticed that Ginny was happier and livelier, almost back to her usual mischievous self. Hermione and Neville came over almost everyday to spend time with their friends.

It was the day before Christmas when Harry finally managed to get his dad alone by telling him that he had something important to ask.

They went into the library and sat down on a couch.

"So, son, what is it you wanted to ask me?"

Harry looked nervously at his feet.

James noticed his son's nervousness and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Harry, what is it? You can ask me anything. I'm your father. I'll understand whatever it is you want to know." Then, as Harry raised his head, James asked with a twinkle in his eye, "This wouldn't have to do with girls now, would it?"

Harry's eyes bulged. "Er, actually, no, Dad."

James breathed a sigh of relief, "Whew, I'm glad I don't have to give you 'the talk' yet."

“Um, what’s ‘the talk’, Dad?”

“Never you mind now. Maybe we can have it in a few years. But now, what is it you wanted to ask me?”

“Um, well, Dad,” Harry stammered, “I was wondering if Salazar Slytherin was an ancestor of ours.”

James hadn’t expected this. His eyebrows rose to his hairline. “Whoa, what kind of question is that? Of course not, there’s no connection between Slytherin and our family.”

Harry felt a surge of relief but he had to make sure. “You’re sure, Dad?”

“Definitely,” James said, “Now, what brought that on?”

Harry looked nervously at his feet again, unwilling to answer.

James placed a finger on his son’s chin and lifted it so he could look into the boy’s green eyes. “Come on now, son. Tell me. I told you that I’ll understand whatever it is you want to tell me.”

Harry sighed, “All right, Dad.” He then told him about the writing on the wall, what happened to Colin and the incident in the Dueling Club, including speaking Parseltongue. However, he didn’t tell him about the voice he kept hearing.

At the end of Harry’s tale, James sighed, “Harry, I already know about the writing on the wall and the attack on your friend. Dumbledore told me about them right after each incident. Of course, he didn’t tell me you had spoken Parseltongue.” James paused, trying to decide what to tell his son. “Being able to speak Parseltongue doesn’t mean you’re descended from Salazar Slytherin. In fact,” he leaned closer to Harry and whispered, “you are actually descended from Godric Gryffindor.”

Harry’s eyes bulged, “Really?”

James smiled and continued in a low voice, “Really. It’s not known in general. In fact, you won’t find it mentioned in any book. It’s a secret

passed from father to son. Only your mother, Sirius and Remus know this though I suspect Dumbledore knows, too. I'm still deciding whether to tell your sister."

Harry's face was filled with the awe he felt about being descended from a founder of Hogwarts, in fact, the founder of his house.

James chuckled in amusement at the look of incredulity on Harry's face. Then, he leaned back. "Now, I'm not sure why you can speak Parseltongue. If I may hazard a guess, it may be that when Voldemort tried to curse you, the backlash caused some of his powers to pass to you. It was known that he could speak Parseltongue. He often claimed to be descended from Slytherin."

Harry eyed his father dubiously. "So, I may have gotten this from Voldemort?"

James sighed, "That's the most likely explanation I can think of. Suppose I run this through Dumbledore and your mother, and see what they think?"

Harry looked a little uncomfortable with the idea, then he sighed, "Okay, Dad, but only with them."

James smiled, "Of course, son. In the meantime, tell me how Mrs. Norris looked petrified. I daresay that cat caused me and the other Marauders grief every now and then. In fact, Sirius once remarked that she would look good stuffed."

Harry laughed and launched into a description of Mrs. Norris stiff as a board.

Christmas Eve and Day was a joyous occasion in Potter Manor. It began in the morning with everyone staying in the Manor gathering around the Christmas Tree in the living room to open presents. They were all pleased with their gifts. Harry particularly liked the new Seeker gloves Rose and Ginny had gotten him. He had gotten each of the girls a large assortment of chocolates from Honeydukes, courtesy of Fred and George, knowing that the girls shared an insane love of chocolate in any form.

They had a great breakfast, which ended with Percy turning into a yellow canary for about ten minutes before molting and returning to his usual self. He left the table in disgust, having already been the target of the twins for the past week they had stayed at Potter Manor. So far, Percy had had his hair turned green; his bedsheet shortened, twice; been stuck to the toilet seat for two hours; forced to dance in a clown suit and turned neon pink all over. The other children had had a great laugh from it all.

The four younger kids spent the morning flying around on their brooms. Again, Rose and Ginny had fun flying around the boys, in spite of Harry's Nimbus 2000. Percy spent the day in the library.

Lunch was another fun affair, with Sirius and Remus joining the Potters and their young houseguests. The older Marauders were highly amused with the tales of the pranks their younger proteges had done.

Hermione and Neville joined them for dinner. After dinner, they all gathered around a grand piano in the Ballroom, singing carols, while it snowed outside. Hermione and Neville spent the night in Potter Manor, staying in Rose's and Harry's room respectively.

The next day, they had a great snowball fight after breakfast. Then, they all sat around planning a prank they would pull on the night they returned to Hogwarts, before Hermione and Neville left. Hermione was going with her parents to visit some of her other relatives and would see the others on the Platform on January 3.

Two days later, while they were having breakfast, James said to Harry, "Son, how would you like to see some aurors in training, specifically learning some spells and dueling?"

Harry's eyes widened, "Really, Dad? I'd love, too!"

James smiled, "There's a group halfway through their training, who are having a practical session this afternoon. You can observe some of the spells they use. After that spell you used on Quirrell last June, I think you'd be interested in these."

Harry grinned, "Great. It felt good when I used that spell."

James grinned back, "Good, I wanted to do this a few months ago, but with your punishment and having to get you cleared to observe it, I just got permission last week. Oh, Ron, Fred, George, you three can go along with Harry. I've talked to Arthur and he gave permission."

James shrugged also, "Sure, if you want."

Harry and Ron grinned at each other. "Wicked," Ron said. The twins gave each other a high five.

James turned to Percy, "You can come too if you want."

Percy just shrugged, "Is it okay, Mr. Potter, if I just sit this one out. I still have some homework to finish."

"Hey!" Rose said, "What about me and Ginny? Can we go with them?"

James looked at Lily, who shook her head. James sighed. "Sorry, princess, your mother says you're too young. You're just starting to learn spells. Knowing you, once you see some of the spells the aurors use, you may be tempted to try them. It may be too dangerous for you." He looked at Ginny, "I'm sorry, Ginny, but Molly also said the same thing."

Rose scowled, "Hey! Harry and Ron are only a year older than us. Besides, he's sure to try those spells once he's seen them." Her face was starting to turn as red as her hair.

Lily sat down beside her daughter and placed her hands gently on the girl's shoulders. "Rose, honey, you have to understand. We believe Harry will be able to handle the spells he may see being cast."

Rose crossed her arms over her chest. "It's not fair," she said grumpily. Ginny just sat there, looking miserable.

Harry felt a twinge of guilt at the sight of the two disappointed girls. He turned to his Mum, "Mum, why don't you take Rose and Ginny shopping in Muggle London while we are with the aurors. I'm sure they'd enjoy it. It's been a while since they'd done that."

Lily smiled, "Good idea, Harry" she turned to the girls, "Well, girls, how about it? Feel up to a shopping expedition along Charing Cross?"

Harry leaned over to his sister and whispered, "Don't worry. I'll pass out what I see, wand movements and all."

The girls' mood brightened as they nodded their heads.

After lunch, James apparated back to Potter Manor. Lily and the girls flooded over to the Leaky Cauldron to get a cab. James and the boys flooded to the Ministry, leading them down the golden hall of the fireplaces past the fountain that Harry had always disliked for some reason.

Once past security, they took a lift to the fifth floor. James led them through a set of metal doors into a large room that had a large mattress covering the floor. Standing at attention to one side of the room were ten young men and women, just a little bit older than Percy. In front of them, glaring at the auror recruits was Sirius, dressed in the same auror uniform as James.

Sirius broke into a grin at the sight of James and his charges. He ordered the recruits to the side and approached the visitors.

"Hey, guys, how are you all doing?" he said, his grin growing wider.

The boys grinned back at him.

"We're great, Sirius," Harry said, "We can't wait to see what happens here."

Sirius gave a chuckle and said, "All right, just sit down over by the side and watch."

The four boys sat on the grass while James and Sirius went back to the recruits. For the next two hours, they watched the recruits face off and throw spells at each other.

Harry watched with fascination, paying attention to the incantations and words used. He saw several spells that he could have used

against Malfoy in that duel they had. He hoped that there would be another meeting of the club when they returned to Hogwarts so he could show Malfoy and Snape a thing or two.

Later, they met up with Lily and the girls in the Leaky Cauldron before heading back to Potter Manor. Harry noticed that Rose and Ginny seemed happier than they had been at lunch.

The rest of the holidays passed filled with fun and good cheer for the people in Potter Manor. On New Year's Eve, Molly and Arthur surprised their children, arriving by floo just before dinner. The Weasley children were delighted and spent the rest of the evening hearing their parents' stories of Egypt.

James took this opportunity to pull Harry aside and ask him to join him in the library.

Puzzled, Harry followed his father.

Once they were again seated in the couch, James turned to his son, "Harry, there's one thing I want you to promise me, okay?"

Harry frowned, "What is it, Dad?"

"I want you to promise me that, whatever happens, you will not search for the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry's eyes widened, "You mean that the Chamber is real?"

James sighed, "Yes, it is. Now, this is secret information. I only know this because I'm the Head Auror and I have access to the old files."

Harry looked puzzled, "What old files, Dad?"

James got up and started pacing back and forth, a habit Harry knew his father did when he was worried. James talked as he paced. "What's happening now, with the Chamber, had happened before."

Harry gasped, "Before? When?"

"It happened about fifty years ago. Several people were attacked and a young girl died."

Harry's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open, "Who died?"

"It doesn't matter now," James said, stopping in front of Harry and dropping to one knee in front of him, "What's important is that you understand that the Chamber is real and there really is some form of monster there. It's dangerous to go looking for it."

"Who opened the Chamber then, Dad?" Harry asked, "Was he caught? Do they know what kind of monster was in it? Is it still there?"

"I'm not sure, son," James said, "All the files said was that after the girl died, the attacks stopped. There was a suspect who was expelled but we don't know who it was or if he or she was really guilty. There was no mention as to what kind of creature was hidden in the Chamber. Now," he looked directly into Harry's eyes, "promise me that you will not go to the Chamber of Secrets, no matter what happens. Leave it to Dumbledore and the other professors."

"Even Lockhart?" Harry asked, a small smile on his lips.

James scowled, remembering what had happened to his son after that bludger had broken his arm, "Well, maybe not him. Promise me, okay?"

"Well, okay, Dad." Harry said, hoping his father did not see his fingers crossed behind his back.

The following day, Harry managed to get a compartment on the Express for him, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Rose and Ginny though it was a tight squeeze. The twins were off visiting with their fellow fourth years. Once the train was under way, he told the others what his father had told him about the Chamber.

Ron whistled, "Wow, so the Chamber's been opened before."

"Yeah, fifty years ago," Harry said.

"And it's not known who was responsible for it?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head, "Dad said that the files didn't even say who the suspect was or what happened to him or her after being expelled. No one knows what the monster is, either."

"I bet it was Malfoy's Dad who opened it," Ron said, "You heard what that git said when we found the writing. '*You'll be next, mudbloods*'. His dad probably opened it up when he was here then taught good old Draco how to do it."

"Ron, be reasonable," Hermione said, "It couldn't have been Lucius Malfoy."

"Oh?" Ron said, getting red in the face, "And why not?"

Hermione sighed, "Because, Ronald, it happened fifty years ago, which was probably before Lucius Malfoy was at Hogwarts or even before he was born."

"Then, it was Lucius' dad," Ron said, almost shouting, "who passed it on to him, then he passed it down to Draco."

"Ron!" Harry said, "Keep your voice down! Stop that, you're scaring Ginny," Ginny had turned pale while Ron had been ranting.

Ron's face turned even more red and he mumbled an apology to Ginny.

"I doubt it was one of the Malfoys," Neville said, "I mean, this is only the second time the chamber's been opened. Do you think Lucius Malfoy would have resisted the temptation to open it if he had known how to? Anyway, if one of them had been expelled, it would have been hard to keep that sort of thing a secret, considering their family's status in our world."

The others thought about it and agreed with him. Still Harry had a nagging feeling that Lucius Malfoy was involved in it somehow.

That evening, the students were in the middle of the Return Feast when they started changing again. This time, the changes took place in each House. A quarter of the students changed into Santa Clauses. Another quarter changed into reindeer with red noses and another

quarter became snowmen. The last quarter of the students became elves dressed in green suits with tasseled hats. Everyone started laughing at each other.

The teachers were again speechless. Many of them were laughing. After ten minutes, the students returned to normal, except for Malfoy and his cronies who remained looking like Santa's elves. They ran out of the Great Hall, chased by the laughter of the rest of the students. The Feast then resumed, though a few students laughed every now and then.

Another banner appeared behind the teacher's table, with the words:

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

WELCOME BACK TO HOGWARTS!

FROM THE NEW MARAUDERS

The students returned to their dormitories, full of food and good cheer.

After that night, life settled back into the routine of classes, meals, homework and sleep. Harry also had Quidditch practice to add to his load, leaving him tired in the evening. Two weeks later, his practice paid off when Harry caught the snitch, bringing victory to Gryffindor over Ravenclaw, 280 to 100.

Even then, Harry still found the other students whispering behind his back and Justin was still avoiding him, going so far as to turn back the way he came when he saw Harry. Hermione and Ron told him to ignore it, but Harry still felt bad over the fright Justin had had with the snake.

Finally, three weeks after the start of term, Harry had had enough. He sought out Justin in the library after dinner. Finding out from Ernie MacMillan that he had just missed him, Harry went searching for him in the corridors. Unfortunately, he found Justin stiff as a board in the same water-soaked corridor on the second floor where the writing was still visible in spite of Filch's numerous attempts to clean it. It got worse as McGonagall and Filch just happened to come by at that

moment, followed by Peeves, who hurried off, shouting “Potter been caught in the act” at the top of his ghostly lungs.

McGonagall marched Harry off to Dumbledore’s office. While miserably waiting for the Headmaster, Harry met Dumbledore’s Phoenix, Fawkes. Harry was relieved when Dumbledore assured him that he was not being blamed for Justin’s condition.

Unfortunately, the next day, Harry found most of the school avoiding him and whispering behind his back. Only Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, Neville, Rose and Ginny kept him company. Even the other Gryffindors would move further down the table when Harry came to the Great Hall for meals. Dean and Seamus refused to look at him in the eye, going to sleep before Harry got back to the dorm.

Harry concentrated on his schoolwork, even refusing to help the others plan pranks. Even Quidditch practice was strained as Wood kept mentioning he was a pureblood every now and then. One consolation there was that he had stopped his constant badgering of Harry to catch the snitch.

Valentine’s Day proved to be interesting. In an attempt to liven the spirits of the students, Lockhart had the walls of the Great Hall decorated with large pink flowers and had heart-shaped confetti falling from the ceiling. Even worse, he had drafted a group of dwarfs to dress up in cupid costumes and deliver singing Valentine greetings to the person of a student’s choice. Luckily, Harry was not a recipient of one, though Neville was, much to the pudgy boy’s discomfort.

A week later, Gryffindor managed to beat Hufflepuff in their Quidditch match 300 to 80 and Harry had again made a fantastic catch of the snitch to seal their victory. Unfortunately, since Slytherin had beaten Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, this meant that the two would meet again for the final in the first week of May. At least, after the match, the rest of Gryffindor house treated Harry normally as they celebrated as if they had already won the Cup.

March passed peacefully with no further attacks. Lockhart kept claiming that whoever it was that was responsible had stopped once he/she realized Lockhart was close to catching him/her.

This lack of activity allowed the students to relax and they were less nervous around Harry. With less tension around him, Harry allowed the twins to talk him into doing a prank on April 1, the twins' birthday. Harry agreed since they hadn't really celebrated Ron's birthday the previous January, limiting the celebration to their little group.

The prank started that morning as the students filed into the Great Hall for breakfast.

The rest of April passed with the school in higher spirits than at the beginning of term. The Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs stopped avoiding Harry, which lifted the boy's spirits.

On the day of the Quidditch finals, Harry again heard the Voice while having breakfast. Again, his friends did not hear it. Then, Hermione's eyes had widened. She had a short whispered conversation with Rose, who was seated beside her, then dashed out the Great Hall, telling them she had to go to the Library.

Later, as Harry and Ron approached the Quidditch pitch, they ran into McGonagall who informed them that the match was cancelled due to another attack. She then asked the two stunned boys to accompany her to the Hospital Wing where they were shocked to find a petrified Hermione. It seemed she, a Ravenclaw girl and Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost, had been attacked outside the library. Ron seemed the worst affected by Hermione's condition.

After the triple attack, tension again gripped the castle. One consolation was that the other students no longer suspected Harry. After all, he was in plain sight that entire morning, including the time the attack had occurred and one of the victims was one of his best friends.

Rose and Ginny seemed highly affected by the attack on Hermione. Several times, Harry saw the two with tears in their eyes, causing a dull ache in his heart. Ron and Harry visited Hermione as often as they had time, wishing they knew who was behind the attacks.

Then two weeks after Hermione's attack, Hedwig dropped a letter in Harry's lap during breakfast, addressed to him and Rose. Harry recognized the unruly scrawl of the writer. He nudged his sister and

motioned her to follow him. He then hurried out of the Great Hall and headed for the Quidditch Pitch. Sitting down in one of the front benches, he waited for Rose to catch up.

“What is it, Harry?” she asked him.

“I just got a letter from Dad,” he answered, “It seems important.”

“Well, just don’t sit there. Open it.”

Harry opened the letter and placed it between them so Rose could read it, too.

Dear Harry and Rose,

I’m really sorry to hear that your friend, Hermione has been attacked. I wish I could help her but Dumbledore assures me that the mandrakes will soon be ready to cure all those petrified. However, we may be close to solving the mystery of the perpetrator. The identity of the person who was accused of opening the Chamber fifty years ago and expelled for it has been revealed to me. Unfortunately, it is someone we know and have been friends with for years. If you wish to know his identity, simply say the words for the Map. I leave it up to you if you wish to talk with this person. Just be careful.

Love,

Dad.

Harry and Rose looked at each other.

“Well, bro?” Rose said, “Do you want to know who it was?”

“Of course I do,” Harry said, “For Hermione’s sake, I have to know.”

With a trembling hand, Harry touched his wand to the letter and said, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Most of the letters disappeared; leaving six letters that slowly rearranged themselves in the center of the parchment and spelled out HAGRID.

Chapter 15: Finding the Chamber

Harry and Rose stared at the letters spelling Hagrid's name for a few moments. Then, Rose jumped up from the bench and faced Harry. "That's not true! It can't be!"

Harry grabbed her hands and pulled her back down to the bench, nervously looking around. Fortunately, the only other student around was Ron, who was hurrying toward them, puzzlement and curiosity on his face.

Rose was starting to cry. Harry felt uncomfortable. It's been years since he'd seen her cry and it had always been one of his parents who would comfort her. Finally, just as Ron neared them, Harry pulled Rose into his arms and awkwardly rubbed her back.

"It'll be all right, sis" Harry said.

"How can you say that?" Rose said, sniffing, "I mean, we've known Hagrid for years, practically all our lives. How can he be the one who opened the Chamber all those years ago." Harry barely heard Ron's gasp as he sat beside the Potter siblings.

Harry pulled back to look at his sister. "Look, sis, all Dad said was that Hagrid was the suspect at that time, not that he was the one," Harry said, "He was not convicted. Otherwise, he'd be in Azkaban. I, for one, don't believe he could do that. I doubt he's the Heir of Slytherin."

"Harry," Ron said, "You do know Hagrid has a thing for creatures a tad dangerous. Just last year, he had Fluffy and that dragon baby."

Harry glared at Ron as Rose started to cry again, "Thanks a lot, Ron."

The other boy's face turned red with embarrassment. "Oops, sorry. Er, Harry's right, Rose. Even if he likes, um, more lively creatures, Hagrid would never intentionally hurt anyone."

"Ron's right, sis," Harry said, "You, me, Ron and Ginny have known him for years. You know what a kind heart he has."

Rose finally stopped sniffing and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "Yeah, for someone so big, he's surprisingly gentle."

Harry smiled at her, "There, see, we know better than anyone else that Hagrid's not capable of trying to harm students. However, he may still know something about what happened then."

"How do we find out then?" Ron asked.

"We'll have to ask him soon," Harry said. Then, looking at his watch, he jumped up, "Yipes, we'd better move. We'll be late for class." He helped Rose up. "Are you going to be all right now, sis?"

"Yes, thanks, bro. I'll fill Ginny in on this. She hates not knowing what's going on. See you later."

Harry watched her walk back to the castle then hefted his bag on to his shoulder. Together, he and Ron headed for the greenhouses for Herbology.

Two nights later, Harry and Ron slipped out of Gryffindor Tower, concealed in Harry's invisibility cloak, with the Marauder's Map in one hand. They went outside and headed for Hagrid's hut.

Knocking on the door, they heard the frantic barking of Fang, Hagrid's hound, followed by Hagrid's admonishment to the hound to stop barking.

"Who's there?" Hagrid said, his voice muffled by the door.

Harry pulled the cloak off their heads. "Hagrid," Harry said, "it's me and Ron. Let us in. We have to ask you something."

Hagrid cautiously opened the door, "Oh, it's you two. Come on in, quick." As they entered, they saw the large crossbow in Hagrid's hands.

"Um, Hagrid," Harry said, pointing to the weapon, "what's that for?"

Hagrid looked down at the crossbow as if it was the first time he had seen it, "Well, um, I've bin expectin' – never mind – sit down, yeh two, and have some tea."

Harry and Ron sat down, accepting the teacups from Hagrid, who almost spilled the tea as his hand was trembling.

Harry and Ron exchanged a look then Harry cleared his throat. "Um, Hagrid, we think we know why you were expelled from Hogwarts."

Hagrid almost dropped the kettle he was holding, "You, you do?"

"It had something to do with the Chamber of Secrets, didn't it?" Harry asked.

Hagrid slumped back into the huge armchair opposite them and bowed his head. His shoulders started shaking and Harry and Ron realized that he was crying.

Harry got up and placed a hand on Hagrid's shoulder, squeezing it gently, "It's okay, Hagrid. I don't believe you were responsible for whatever happened then."

Hagrid looked up, hope in his eyes, "Yeh don'?"

Harry shook his head and smiled a little. He looked at Ron and was relieved to see that the redhead was smiling at Hagrid also.

"Now, why don't you tell us about it? We may be able to figure out who had done it and what kind of monster is in that room."

Hagrid slumped back into the armchair, his beard moving and his eyes squinting as he concentrated on remembering the events of fifty years before.

After several minutes of silence, Hagrid finally said, "Firs' of all, Harry, Ron, you have to believe me that Aragog had nothing to do with it."

"Aragog?" Harry asked, "who or what is Aragog?"

Hagrid looked sheepishly at them, "Aragog's a pet I had in when I was a student 'ere at Hogwarts."

"A pet?" Ron said, "What kind of pet was it?"

Hagrid looked uncomfortable, "e was a spider," he said, not noticing the look of horror on Ron's face, "I bought him from a traveler from Africa in my thir' year, kep' him in a box and feed 'im on scraps fer weeks. He grew quite fast, almos' five feet across by the time those attacks began."

Harry was trying hard not to laugh at Ron for the look on his face. He cleared his throat to stifle his mirth. Ron just gave him a dirty look.

"So, Hagrid," Harry said, "I guess someone accused Aragog of being responsible for attacking students."

"Yeah," Hagrid said, "I tol' him that it wasn't him, that it never killed no one."

"Who was it, Hagrid?" Harry said, "who blamed your pet?"

"It was that damned Tom," Hagrid said, his voice angry.

"Tom?" Harry said.

"His full name was Tom Marvolo Riddle," Hagrid said, "He was a Slytherin about two years older'n me an' a prefect."

"Hey," Ron said, "I've seen that name on the list of prefects in the Trophy room. He was even Head boy and received a special award for school services."

Hagrid gave a snort, "Yeah, he got that award fer turnin' me in."

"How'd he know about that, that spider?" Ron asked, his voice momentarily breaking.

"He got a glimpse o' it," Hagrid said, "once, since I was keepin' it near the Dungeons."

"Hagrid," Harry said, "what happened to Aragog?"

“Good ol’ Tom tried to blast him after that girl was killed.” Hagrid said, “but Aragog got away.”

“Where, where is he now?” Ron asked, looking around nervously.

“Oh, he’s safe.” Hagrid said, “I found him not long after Dumbledore got me ta be the assistan’ fer Jack Fergis, the old gameskeeper. He’s in a hollow in the middle of the Forbidden Forest. Got himself a family of ‘is own.” Hagrid didn’t notice Ron looking nervously out the window, as if expecting Aragog to peer into Hagrid’s hut. “He jus’ stays thar, never ventures outta da Forest.” Ron breathed a sigh of relief.

Harry placed a hand on his mouth to keep from bursting out with laughter. After a few seconds, he said, “Hagrid, you said a girl was killed. How many students were attacked?”

Hagrid blew a breath out, “I’d say ‘bout five students were attacked, all muggleborn. That girl, Myrtle, was the only one who died, killed in a bathroom. It was ‘orrible. Thought Hogwarts was gonna close. Then, Tom turned me in and I got expelled. Funny thing is, it all stopped after that.” Hagrid then looked at Harry and Ron, a desperate look in his eyes, “I hope you two don’ think I was responsible fer those attacks.”

Harry placed a hand on Hagrid’s shoulder, “Of course not, Hagrid,” he looked back at Ron. “right, Ron?”

“Oh. Oh, yeah,” Ron said, “we know you too well to think that.”

Hagrid smiled, “Great.”

“Hagrid,” Harry said, “do you have any idea what kind of monster was responsible for those attacks?”

Hagrid looked thoughtful for a while, “Well, Harry, I’m not sure what it was. One thing’s fer sure, whatever it was, Aragog was scared of it, kep’ pleadin’ with me ta let him leave.”

Harry then looked at his watch, “It’s getting late, Hagrid. We’d better head back to the castle. Thanks for talking to us.”

"It's a relief really, Harry," Hagrid said, "I been afraid all these years for someone to find out abou' this. I'm just glad you two accept that I'm innocent."

Harry and Ron smiled and reassured Hagrid that they still trusted him. They slipped under the invisibility cloak again and left Hagrid's hut.

As they were walking through the grounds, Ron whispered, "Bloody hell, Harry, what can scare a five foot wide spider?"

Harry stopped walking. "Ron, remember," he whispered back, "that night we found the writing on the wall, we saw those spiders rushing to leave through one little hole."

"Blimey, Harry," Ron said, "you're right. So, it's something that all spiders are scared off. I wish Hermione could have heard this. I bet she could figure out what it is."

"I think that's why she was on her way to the library," Harry said, "when she was attacked. Hang on, she talked to Rose just before running off that morning. Maybe she said something to Rose that helped her figure it out. We'll ask Rose tomorrow about it."

They resumed walking and slipped into the castle, reaching Gryffindor tower without incident. When they passed through the portrait hole, they were surprised to find Rose and a nervous-looking Ginny in the otherwise empty common room, waiting for them.

"All right, bro," Rose said, "what did Hagrid say?"

"Well," Harry began, as the boys sat opposite the girls, "he said that he was accused of opening the Chamber because he had a pet that was accused of attacking the students then."

"What kind of pet was it?" Rose asked, "Knowing Hagrid, it was something unique."

"It was a g-g-giant sp-sp-spider," Ron said, "Can you believe that? He even gave it a name, Aragog. Really mental he is. And that thing is still out there, in the Forbidden Forest, with children." Ron blew out a breath, "I'm glad we didn't run into any of those when he brought us

there last year looking for that unicorn. I'm never going into that place again."

By now, Rose and Ginny were trying hard to suppress their amusement at Ron's outburst.

Harry grinned at Ron.

"Anyway," Harry said, his face assuming a neutral expression, "The spider couldn't have been the one responsible for the attacks. I've never heard of a spider petrifying anything. It was something different, something that spiders fear very much. Hagrid said even Aragog was afraid of it and didn't want to remain in the castle."

Rose gave a low whistle, "It must be something really bad for a huge spider to fear it."

Harry turned fully to Rose, "Sis, that morning Hermione was attacked, she talked to you before running off toward the library. What was it about?"

"Oh," Rose said, "I almost forgot about that. All she said was that you had heard the voice again and asked me again if I had heard it. I just told her I've never heard it."

Harry's brow furrowed in puzzlement. What was significant about that? "That's all she asked of you? She didn't say anything else?"

Rose screwed her face up in concentration as she tried to remember, a habit she had inherited from her father. After a minute, she said, "I think so. Oh, wait a moment, as she moved away from me, she was mumbling something about you being the only one who understood it." She turned her head to Harry, "What did she mean by that?"

"I'm not sure," Harry said, "Understood what?"

The group was silent for a while then Rose's face suddenly brightened, "Wait a minute, Harry. What is the one language you found out you could understand but no one else can?"

Harry raised an eyebrow, "I don't know. I only know English and anyone here can understand that." Then, his eyes widened, "Hang on, do you mean Parseltongue?"

Rose nodded her head, "Yes, I think so. That voice was probably just hissing. No one else would have noticed it. Yet, you heard it clearly."

"That means the monster is some kind of snake," Ginny said, finally. The others jumped slightly, having forgotten that she was there.

"Blimey, Harry," Ron said, "if it is some kind of snake, what snake can petrify things?"

"We'll just have to search for it in the library," Rose said, "That's where Hermione was headed for, so it should be a good place to look, probably in some book on magical creatures."

"That's a good idea, sis," Harry said, "We'll try it during our free time."

"By the way, bro," Rose said, "who accused Hagrid? Was it a professor or a student?"

"It was a student," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ron said, "a no good Slytherin prefect, the slimy git."

"A Slytherin?" Ginny asked, "Did Hagrid say what his name was?"

Harry thought for a moment, "It was Tom, something. Oh yeah, it was Tom Marvolo Riddle." Harry barely heard the gasp from Ginny's lips. "What a strange middle name, Marvolo."

Ginny quickly got up and headed toward the stairs to the dorms, muttering something about it being sleepy.

Harry saw a look of fury pass over Rose's face as she watched Ginny climb the stairs. "Hey, sis, is something wrong with Ginny? Did you guys have a fight?"

Rose just sighed and shook her head, "No, Harry. Don't worry about her. It's a girl thing." She got up from the couch, "Well, I have to get

some sleep, too or I'll fall asleep in class." She then followed Ginny up to the dorm.

Harry frowned but didn't say anything. Harry sensed that something was going on between the two, but he knew they wouldn't say anything to him. The two girls had had the occasional fights between friends over the years and Harry had learned the hard way to let them work it out. He led Ron back to their dorms and the two boys soon fell into an exhausted sleep.

The next afternoon, as Harry, Ron and Neville were headed for the Great Hall for dinner, they ran into Rose, who was beaming and seemed excited.

"Harry, Ron," she said, "I think I know what the creature is." She showed them a piece of parchment, apparently torn from an old library book. "It's a basilisk."

Harry and Ron read the text on the page, taking note of the attributes of a basilisk – called King of Serpents, can reach gigantic size, can live hundreds of years, has lethal venom, murderous stare, feared by spiders, crowing of the rooster fatal to it.

"Uh, guys," Neville said, "are you guys talking about the monster in the Chamber of Secrets?" He looked at Rose, "Is this a page from a library book? Madame Pince will go spare." Rose's eyes widened and her face darkened as if she hadn't noticed that Neville was with Harry and Ron, which she probably didn't due to her excitement.

"Yeah, Nev," Harry said, drawing Neville's attention from Rose, "we've been trying to find out what it is. That way, we can help the professors find it. I ran into Hagrid holding a couple of dead roosters soon after the writing appeared on the wall. Then, there's the voice. I was the only one who heard it because I was the only one who could understand it since I can speak Parseltongue. It all fits."

"Harry," Neville said, "what voice are you talking about?"

Harry sighed and pulled the other three into an empty classroom. He then explained to Neville about the voice he had been hearing. Neville listened wide-eyed but stayed put.

Finally, he said, "Wow, that's really something. So, it seems that the monster responsible for these attacks is a basilisk?"

"It seems so, based on what we know," Harry said.

"But, Harry," Ron said, "why aren't any of the one who were attacked dead? They're just petrified."

Harry thought for a moment, "Well, I think none of them looked at it straight in the eye. Justin and Mrs. Norris probably saw it reflected in the pools of water, Colin through his camera and Hermione and that Ravenclaw prefect saw it through Nearly Headless Nick, who probably took the full blast but then he's already dead."

"So, it's a basilisk," Neville said, "what do we do now?"

"Well, we should tell the professors," Harry said.

"Can we do it after dinner, Harry?" Ron said, "I'm starving. Surely, it can wait for a while." His stomach then growled quite loudly and the other three laughed.

"All right, Ron," Harry said, "We'll have dinner first. Hey, sis, where's Ginny?"

Rose's face clouded for a moment before she answered, "Um, she brought our things up to the dorm. I better go see if she's still there. See you guys."

They parted ways, the boys continuing to head for the Great Hall and Rose headed back to Gryffindor Tower.

As they passed through the Entrance Hall, they saw three men standing there with Professor Dumbledore and Hagrid. One of them, to Harry's surprise and apprehension was his father.

"Dad," Harry called out as he approached them, "what are you doing here?" He then recognized the other two men – Frank Longbottom, Neville's dad and Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic.

James and Frank looked uncomfortable as he watched the boys approach them. "Hi, son. Hello, Ron, Neville," James said, "Now, I know you're wondering why we are here. We just came to accompany Hagrid to the Ministry."

"The Ministry?" Harry said, "You're arresting him! How could you? He's your friend!"

Neville looked at his own dad with fury but remained silent. Ron looked shocked.

James and Frank looked down at their shoes, ashamed to face their sons. Fudge stepped in just then, stepping between father and son. "Now, Harry, these attacks are getting worse. People are worried. The Ministry has to do something to put a stop to the whole thing. Hagrid's record is against him."

"But he's innocent!" Harry shouted, "There is no way that he could be responsible for those attacks. He's no descendent of Slytherin."

Just then, Dumbledore cleared his throat, "That's what I told the Minister, Harry. Taking Hagrid will not stop these attacks." The headmaster's blue eyes were lit with a fire Harry had never seen before.

"Come now, Albus," Fudge said, his hands fidgeting with the lime-green bowler hat he always wore, "I have to be seen to be doing something. I'm under a lot of pressure to do something. The school governors have been sending owls all day."

Harry then stormed off, furious at Fudge and his father. He moved to the stairs but didn't notice that his father had followed him.

"Harry," James placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, but Harry shook it off. "Look, son. As much as I believe Hagrid is innocent, I have to follow orders. It'll be all right. I volunteered with Frank to be here to make sure Hagrid is treated right. Don't worry. We'll just put him in a holding cell at the Ministry until this is sorted out. He won't be going to Azkaban, at least not without a proper trial." He sent a glare at the Minister as he said the last sentence.

Harry looked warily at his father, "Promise?"

James smiled a little, "Yes. Now, you and Ron head back to Gryffindor Tower. Don't worry about Hagrid."

Then, James turned his head back to the other men and exclaimed, "Bloody hell." Harry turned to where his father's gaze was fixed and saw the hated figure of Lucius Malfoy talking to Dumbledore.

Potter father and son immediately moved toward them. They just heard Malfoy say, "Yes, Dumbledore. All twelve of us have voted on it. You're out as of right now."

"Just what are you on about, Malfoy," James said.

"Ah, Potter, come to take custody of the perpetrator of these ghastly attacks, I see," Malfoy said, a sneer on his face.

"Hagrid is still considered innocent, Malfoy," James said, "The minister just wanted to take him in for questioning. He'll be back here in a day or two. Now, what's your business here?"

Malfoy smirked, "I have the unhappy task, as one of the school's governors of relieving Professor Dumbledore as Headmaster. We of the board are of the opinion that he has lost his touch. He's not been able to stop these dreadful attacks, so we have voted to relieve him."

"How many did you threaten or blackmail before they agreed with you, Malfoy?" James said.

"Now, now, Potter," Malfoy said, "that can be taken as slander."

"Enough, Lucius," Dumbledore said, "If the school's governors have all agreed on this, I will step aside."

"No!" Harry, Ron, Neville and Hagrid all shouted.

"However," Dumbledore said, slowly and clearly, "you will find that I will only truly have left this school when none are left that are loyal to me, and help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it."

“Admirable sentiments,” Malfoy said, “I hope your successor has better luck preventing any more attacks.”

Dumbledore turned to Harry, Neville and Ron, a kind smile on his face. “It is dinnertime already, boys. You better get over to the Great Hall. Don’t worry about me or Hagrid.”

The boys exchanged looks and sighed. They headed for the Great Hall, looking back one last time as the six men walked out the entrance doors.

It didn’t take long for the news to spread among the students. Without Dumbledore, they didn’t know who would protect them. Harry and his two friends didn’t have any appetite after what they had witnessed.

“Damn,” Harry said, “In all the excitement I forgot to tell Dad what we think the monster in the Chamber is. We have to tell one of the professors.”

“Harry,” Ron said, “if it is a basilisk, how is it getting around? I mean, how can you hide a giant snake?”

Harry thought for a moment, “That time I followed the voice before we found the writing and when I found Justin, there was a lot of water in puddles on the floor. How did the water get on the floor?”

“The only source for that much water is the bathrooms,” Neville said.

“Of course!” Harry said, “It’s using the plumbing to go around the school.”

“Then the entrance to the Chamber must be in a bathroom,” Ron said.

“But which one?” Neville said, “There are dozens here.”

“It has to be one that people seldom go to,” Harry said, “Otherwise, there’d be more attacks.”

“Wait a minute, Harry,” Ron said, “Didn’t Hagrid say that the girl who was killed was called Myrtle and she died in a bathroom. What if she never left that bathroom?”

"Then, the entrance must be.." Harry said.

"In Moaning Myrtle's bathroom," Harry and Ron said together.

Neville looked at them in confusion, "Who's Moaning Myrtle?"

Just then, McGonagall stood up at the Head table, a megaphone in one hand. She placed it on her mouth, amplifying her voice, "Your attention, please. All students are to return at once to their dormitories. All professors will please proceed to the second floor corridor."

Harry beckoned to the two boys to get closer to him then he said, "Something's up. Isn't that the corridor where the writing is still on the wall? We'd better check it out. Let's let the other students get ahead of us. Luckily, I have my dad's cloak in my robe's pocket."

The three boys lagged behind the other students as the student population headed back to their dormitories. They ducked into a side corridor and waited until the halls were deserted. Then, throwing Harry's cloak over themselves, they moved to the second floor corridor.

When they got to the last corner before the area where the blood writing was placed, they carefully looked around the corner. The teachers were all massed in front of the writing. Now, there was a new sentence under the previous words. It read:

Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.

Then they heard Flitwick ask, "so, Minerva, who is the girl taken into the chamber?"

McGonagall sighed and said, "Ginny Weasley."

Harry and Neville heard Ron gasp beside them. They saw McGonagall turn to Lockhart.

"Well, Gilderoy, now is your chance to prove what you can do."

"Pardon?" Lockhart said, "What do you mean, Minerva?"

“Well, you’ve been saying for weeks that you know where the entrance to the Chamber is and what the monster is. You said you just needed a chance to prove it. Well, here is your chance. Go and get the girl back.”

For a moment, Lockhart looked stunned but then, he stood straight and said, “Right, of course. I’m the Defense against the Dark Arts teacher. Okay, I’ll just go get ready, shan’t I?” He turned around and strode away, passing the three hidden boys.

The three boys exchanged looks and followed Lockhart. Then, just before they reached the Defense classroom, Harry pulled them aside into another classroom.

Ron looked at Harry, puzzled, “What is it, Harry? We’ve got to talk to Lockhart, tell him all we know.”

Harry turned around, “Nope, we don’t. After all that’s been happening, I don’t think that git will give us any help. I mean, he made my arm bones disappear and let those pixies loose in class. No, we’re saving Ginny ourselves.”

Ron and Neville looked at each other and then at Harry. Seeing the determined look in his eyes, they nodded.

Chapter 16: To the rescue

Harry, Ron and Neville slowly approached the door to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, still under Harry's invisibility cloak. Harry turned the brass doorknob and pushed the door open.

It hadn't changed from the last time he, Ron and Hermione had been there, still one of the most depressing and gloomy places Harry had seen. There was a row of chipped sinks with a large, cracked and spotted mirror over them. The doors to the stalls were wooden, flaking and scratched.

Then Harry saw a mass of black robes and red hair in front of one of the sinks. The three boys moved out of the cloak and hurried over to the prone figure. They knelt beside the person and Ron slowly turned the person over. It was Rose.

Harry pulled her into his arms. She was limp with her eyes closed and still breathing, so she wasn't petrified. "Rose, wake up!" Harry cried, shaking her shoulders.

"Ooh, it was horrible," said a voice behind them. The three boys turned around and found a squat ghost of a girl with lank hair, thick pearly glasses and one of the glumest faces they had ever seen.

"Er, hello, Myrtle," Harry said, "Did you see what happened here?"

"Oh, yes," Myrtle said, "I was just there hovering over the door of my stall when a small girl with red hair came in. She was walking stiffly, clutching some sort of book. That red head on floor," she pointed at Rose, "came in and asked her what she was doing. The first redhead turned around. Her eyes were all wide and not blinking, really scaring. Then she pulled out her wand and hit the second girl with some sort of red light. I fled back here into the u-bend of the toilet. I just got back when you three came in." She then looked shrewdly at them, "What are you doing here? This is a girl's bathroom?"

"Um, I'm Harry Potter, this is Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom. We came to ask you something," Harry said, "But it can wait until I get Rose here awake. She's my sister." Then, he took out his wand. He had seen the red light used by the auror trainees that day he and his

friends had watched them. Sirius had told him that it was a stunning spell. He had also seen his father use another spell to awaken those stunned. "Enervate," he now said, pointing his wand to his sister's chest.

Rose stirred. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

"Are you all right, sis," Harry said looking into her face, "what happened?"

She suddenly sat up, almost banging heads with Harry, "Where's Ginny?"

"We don't know," Harry said, "Can you tell us what happened? Myrtle, the ghost over there, said she saw Ginny stun you. Why'd she do that?"

Rose looked at the three of them, despair in her eyes. She sighed, "Something's wrong with Ginny. She seems to be possessed or something. I think it has something to do with that diary."

"What diary?" Ron asked.

"Well, after that trip to Diagon Alley before my birthday, she found a diary within the second hand book of spells she got. She showed the diary to me that morning of my birthday. It was a small, thin book with a black cover. It seemed empty except for a name on the first page, T. M. Riddle." Harry and Ron looked at each other, stunned.

Rose continued, "Ginny told me she tried to write on it but the ink just vanished, like it was being absorbed. I was intrigued. I wrote down 'Hello' on it and to our astonishment, the words, *'hello to you, too'* appeared on it. Ginny then wrote down her name. It answered back with *'Hello, Ginny. I'm Tom Riddle. How'd you get hold of my diary?'* I became concerned and asked Ginny not to use it. She agreed at first, but apparently changed her mind. Looking back, I think she started to write in it when I started to have detention alone."

"Yeah," Ron said, "She seemed a bit lonely without you beside her."

"The attacks on students started about then, I think," Harry said, his hand cupping his chin, "Come to think of it, every time an attack occurred, the two of you weren't together." He looked back at Rose, "So, what happened tonight?"

"Well, remember that night after you talked to Hagrid and told us about Tom Riddle being the one who turned Hagrid in? Well, she was upset hearing that about the guy. I ran after her and asked her if she was writing to Tom in the diary. She admitted she had been whenever I was in detention because she was lonely. I asked her why and she said there were things she couldn't share, even with me. She then started telling me about having blank spots in her memory. That night the writing appeared on the wall out there, she woke up to find herself with blood and feathers on her hands and clothes, rooster feathers, with no idea about what happened. At other times, she'd find herself in places without knowing how she got there, usually after an attack had occurred."

Harry's eyes widened, "She was probably the one who killed the roosters and wrote on the wall with their blood."

"I think so, too, Harry," Rose said, "but I doubt she did it freely. She said she asked Riddle about it a couple of times, but he never really said anything about it. That night you talked with Hagrid was the final straw. I got her to agree to get rid of it. Apparently, the diary had other ideas."

"What does that have to do with the Chamber?" Ron asked.

Harry turned to him, "Don't you see, Ron? Somehow, that diary is controlling Ginny, making her do awful things. It probably made her open the Chamber and let the monster loose."

"Yes, I think so, too," Rose said, "I was going up to Gryffindor Tower to get her for dinner, then I saw her walking down the corridor. She seemed stiff in her movements. She was clutching the diary. I decided to follow her first. She came down to this bathroom, then she moved to those sinks over there. Then, I finally spoke to her. She turned around. I saw her eyes, they were so round and wide, just staring. Before I could do anything else, she pulled out her wand and I got knocked out."

“So, what do we do now?” Neville asked.

Harry cupped his chin again, thinking hard. “First, we need to get Rose to the Hospital Wing. She needs to be checked out by Madame Pomfrey.”

“No!” Rose said, “I want to help Ginny.” She stood up then wobbled a bit, steadying herself on a sink.

“There, you see, sis.” Harry said, “You need to get some rest. Don’t worry. We’ll take care of Ginny.”

“I-I’ll take her to the Hospital Wing, Harry,” Neville said.

Harry squinted at Neville. He barely saw the blush form on Rose’s face. “All right, Nev. Just be careful. I wouldn’t want to have to hurt you if you do something *inappropriate*.”

“Harry!” Rose said, her face turning as red as her hair, “I can take care of myself.” She didn’t notice Neville’s cheeks turn a little pink.

“Oh, not right now, you can’t,” Harry said, “Now, go on, the two of you. Nev, you better tell McGonagall what happened. Maybe she can reach our dads.”

Neville nodded then gingerly placed a hand on Rose’s waist and the other on her shoulder and guided her out the bathroom

Once they were gone, Harry turned to Ron, “We’ve got to get into that Chamber and save Ginny.”

“How do we do that?” Ron asked, “We don’t even know where the entrance is.”

“There’s one way to find out,” Harry said. He turned to Myrtle, who was still floating over them.

Several minutes later, Harry and Ron were walking down a dark stone tunnel miles below the castle, their only light at the end of Harry’s wand. As they walked on, they started stepping on the bones of countless small animals, a crunch sounding with every step they

made. Harry hoped that Ginny would not look any way similar to these remains.

After a while, they came upon a giant greenish snake skin, about twenty feet long. It looked old and moldy. Obviously, the owner would be a lot larger now, which was daunting knowledge for the boys.

They walked on and finally came to a solid wall, where two entwined serpents were carved, glittering emeralds serving as their eyes.

Just as Harry stepped forward to the wall, his foot stepped on a strange stone that depressed into the floor. Then, he heard a rumbling sound above him. Looking up, he saw the ceiling above giving way. He threw himself forward. A moment later, he picked himself up from the floor and looked back. There was now a wall of broken rock and debris. There was no sign of Ron.

Harry ran to the wall of debris, "Ron, where are you?" he shouted.

Faintly, through the wall, he heard, "I'm here, behind this pile of rocks. You okay, Harry?"

"I'm fine, Ron," Harry answered.

"What happened, Harry?" Ron asked, "Why'd the ceiling collapse?"

"I think it was some sort of trap I set off," Harry said, "come on, let's try shifting some of these rocks so you can come through."

"That'll take too long, Harry," Ron said, "Ginny may be running out of time. You go on and I'll try moving some of the rocks so you and Ginny can get through once you find her."

"All right, Ron," Harry said, "If I'm not back within a couple of hours..."

"Go on, Harry," Ron said.

Harry turned around and walked up to the pair of snakes on the wall, carefully watching now where he stepped. Just as he had done above to open the entrance, Harry used Parseltongue to command the

snakes to open. The snakes parted, as the wall cracked open and the halves disappeared into the tunnel walls.

Harry found himself at the end of a very, long and dimly lit chamber with towering pillars entwined with more carved serpents lining the sides. Torches were held in sconces along the wall, most of them unlit. The ceiling was out of sight. A few puddles of water were scattered across the marble floor.

He slowly walked forward, wand out, peering into the shadows in case the basilisk was lurking around. Then, he came up to the last pair of pillars and came in sight of a statue as tall as the chamber. Its face was ancient and monkeyish, with a long thin beard, so high above that they had to crane their necks to see it. It was in sweeping wizards robes. And in between the grayish feet of the statue, was another figure in black robes, with red hair.

“Ginny!” Harry cried, sprinting forward. Harry then knelt beside Ginny, muttering, “Please don’t be dead – don’t be dead.” He turned her over carefully. Her face was quite pale and cold yet she was breathing. Since her eyes were closed, she wasn’t petrified. Harry started shaking her, “Ginny, please wake up.” He took out his wand and prepared to use the same spell he had awakened Rose with.

“She won’t wake,” a soft voice said behind him, “not even to an enervate spell.”

Harry stood quickly and turned around to find a tall black-haired sixteen-year old boy leaning on a pillar. His color seemed a bit off, almost like he was from a black-and-white television screen. The strange boy started to move forward toward him and Ginny.

“Who are you?” Harry asked.

“My name is Tom Riddle,” the other boy said.

Harry gasped, “How is it that you are here?”

“I’m a memory,” Riddle said quietly, “preserved for fifty years in a diary.” He pointed between the statue’s toes. There, lying open in the

floor just a few inches from Ginny was a book fitting the description Rose had given.

"You're the one who turned Hagrid in," Harry said, "You caused him to be expelled!"

Riddle smirked, "Oh, you know about that. It was fairly simple. Headmaster Armando Dippet was so easy to convince. He was a trusting fool. I had him convinced that Hagrid's pet was the one responsible for the death of that girl and the other attacks. I knew the existence of the beast for a few months then, but thought it would make a perfect scapegoat."

"Scapegoat?" Harry asked. His eyes then widened, "You framed Hagrid! You're the one responsible for those attacks then."

Riddle smiled, a cold and cruel smile, "Yes, Harry Potter. Bravo, you've figured it out, something Dippet never did. No one seemed to realize that he couldn't have been the Heir of Slytherin, or have the power to open the Chamber of Secrets, something I had worked for five years to accomplish."

"How'd you know who I am?" Harry asked.

"Oh, I know who you are and your history," Riddle said. He smiled again, "Ginny told me. She wrote to me, not often, usually when her best friend, your sister, I believe, was absent. She told me all about you, your sister and family, how great it was to be around you, to be a friend of the kind and great Harry Potter, when you hated any publicity. It was so tedious at times, listening to the prattle of a mere child. But writing to me enabled me to pour a little of my own secrets into her."

"What secrets?" Harry asked.

"You see, after I turned Hagrid in, I had to stop the attacks. I was surprised at how well my plan had worked. But then, the Transfiguration teacher, Dumbledore, persuaded Dippet to have Hagrid trained as gamekeeper after he was expelled. Then, he seemed to watch my every move."

“He probably suspected Hagrid was innocent,” Harry said, “He probably saw right through you.”

“Well, he kept quite an annoying watch on me,” Riddle said, “So, it became dangerous to open the chamber again while I remained at school. So, I put part of myself, a memory, an echo, in this diary, waiting for another opportunity to continue Salazar Slytherin’s noble work and get rid of all the muggleborns in this school. Ginny Weasley gave me the opportunity, once I had worn down her will, which took a surprising amount of time to do.”

“You fiend,” Harry said, “You controlled her and made her write those words on the wall, open the Chamber, release the monster.”

“Yes, it was going so well,” Riddle said, “then your sister talked to her. Ginny became frightened by the diary. She wrote one last time, saying goodbye to me. I decided that it was time to meet you. So, I took control of Ginny again and made her write those last words on the wall, hoping it would lure you here. I knew that as her friend, you’d want to save her.”

“Why did you want to meet me?” Harry asked.

“I was curious. I wondered how a boy like you, unremarkable looking and with no extraordinary magical powers, could have defeated the most powerful wizards of all time. How did you escape with a mere scar, yet Lord Voldemort lost his powers?”

Harry was surprised, “What do you care? Voldemort was before your time.”

“Oh, you are mistaken, Harry,” Riddle said. “Lord Voldemort is my past, present and future.”

He bent down and took hold of Ginny’s wand. With it, he wrote fiery letters, spelling his full name. Then, with a wave of the wand, the letters rearranged to form *I am Lord Voldemort*.

Harry was stunned. “You’re Voldemort!”

Riddle smiled again, "Yes, it's a name I assumed while still in Hogwarts, among my closest friends here. I wanted a name to replace the filthy name of my filthy Muggle father, who abandoned my mother when he learned she was a witch. A name that all wizards will fear once I become the most powerful wizard in the world."

"You're not the most powerful wizard in the world," Harry said, "Albus Dumbledore is the most powerful wizard in the world."

"Dumbledore? Hah!" Riddle said, laughing, "I heard he's been dismissed, dismissed because of a memory. Well, I won't be a memory for long. You see how pale Ginny is? She has poured a lot of herself into the diary which is why I am before you now. As she gets weaker, I get stronger. Soon, she will be dead and I will be whole again."

"Not if I can help it," Harry said. He raised his wand and shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

The spell hit Riddle and just passed through him, impacting on a far pillar.

Riddle laughed, "Oh, not just yet, Harry. But let us return to our conversation. From what I found out from Ginny, we have met twice, in your past and my future and twice I have failed to kill you. How did you survive? What extraordinary powers do you have?"

"I don't know," Harry answered him, "No one is sure why I survived and you lost your powers that night, not my parents, not even Dumbledore. But he told me that love has something to do with it, the love of my mother who was willing to die to protect me."

"Ah," Riddle said, "Love is it? What kind of power can that give? Let us see. Let's match the power of Lord Voldemort and the great Harry Potter." Riddle moved to the foot of the huge statue and said something in Parseltongue.

The mouth of the huge statue opened very wide into a huge hole and Harry heard something stirring within.

Remembering a spell he had seen before, Harry pointed his wand at the statue above the opening, "Reducto!" A red light from his wand hit the spot he was pointing at, causing some pieces to fall, partially blocking the hole.

Riddle smirked, "Quite good, but not good enough. Obliterate!" The blocking rocks disappeared.

His heart hammering in his chest, Harry backed up until he hit one of the pillars. He ducked behind it, facing the wall. He heard the sound of something huge hitting the floor followed by slithering of scales along the floor, getting nearer to him.

Harry felt a wave of cold fill his body as his heart increased its speed. He started thinking *Help me, help me, someone please help me.*

Then he heard music, an eerie spine-tingling music. It seemed to fill him with buoyant hope. It was coming closer.

Then he heard Riddle say, "What's that bird doing down here? No, it can't be...a phoenix!"

Harry felt something fall to his feet. He looked down at what appeared to be a ragged bundle. Then, something heavy landed on his shoulder. Looking there, Harry was surprised to see the large, crimson bird with a golden tail perched on his shoulder.

"Fawkes?" Harry said, recognizing the bird as Dumbledore's phoenix. He looked down again at his feet and recognized the rags as the Hogwarts sorting hat. Then, his shoulder felt lighter as Fawkes lifted off him.

Suddenly, there was a loud, explosive hissing sound just behind and above him and something heavy smashed into him, knocking him sideways to the floor and making him drop his wand.

Riddle was screaming, "NO! WHAT ARE YOU DOING, STUPID BIRD? GET AWAY FROM HERE!" Then he was hissing and Harry understood him clearly, "Leave the bird alone! Kill the boy! He's right behind you."

Harry dared look up and saw a huge greenish snake weaving drunkenly above him, Fawkes circling around its head. Then, Harry noticed the serpent's eyes were bleeding and it was spitting in agony.

Harry ducked as the basilisk's tail passed above him. He could now see its mouth filled with long deadly fangs dripping with poison. He needed to kill it but couldn't find his wand. He needed a different weapon.

Then, Harry glanced down at the Sorting Hat, lying on its side. Something appeared from inside it, some kind of silver handle. Grasping it, Harry pulled on it and was surprised to see a sword emerge from the hat. It looked beautiful, like those used by knights he had seen on television.

Shifting the sword in his hand, Harry got to his feet. The basilisk was now weaving its head back and forth, a long tongue flicking in and out. Harry knew from watching nature documentaries that this was how snakes smelled out their prey.

Riddle saw the weapon in Harry's hand, "Well, nice sword, Harry. I hope you can use it."

Harry leaped forward as the Basilisk lunged at him, just missing by a handbreadth. Harry landed next to the diary and Ginny. Harry noticed that Ginny seemed paler now, almost lacking in color. He also saw that Riddle was more substantial and less white than when he had arrived in the Chamber. Harry realized that time was running out for his friend.

Then, an idea stuck him, two actually, two desperate intertwined ideas.

Harry slowly picked up the diary in one hand as he stood up.

"Hey!" he shouted, "Over here, you stupid reptile!" He stamped his feet on the floor, knowing that snakes also were sensitive to vibrations.

The basilisk turned to the sound of his voice. It seemed to gather itself then lunged forward. As the mouth moved toward him, Harry

jumped sideways, throwing the diary into the massive jaws. The jaws clamped shut on the black book.

Riddle screamed, "No!"

As basilisk's head smashed into the floor, Harry quickly raised the sword above his head and smashed it down on the area right behind the head. Like a butter knife slicing through hot butter, the sword sliced through the massive body, neatly severing the head off.

Harry dropped to his knees and looked toward Riddle. He was screaming and convulsing. Then, he exploded in a flash of light and was gone.

Ginny moaned and Harry moved to her side, dropping the sword and knelt beside her. She opened her eyes which widened on seeing Harry. Harry helped her sit up.

Tears started to flow from her eyes. "Oh, Harry, it was me – I opened the Chamber, I set the monster loose, Riddle made me, even made me stun Rose," she sobbed, "Wh-where is he? The last thing I remember is him coming out of that diary."

Harry placed a hand gently on her shoulder, "It's all right, Ginny. It's over. Riddle's gone and the basilisk's dead. Look." He pointed at the serpent's severed head, where the diary was impaled on one of the fangs.

Harry got up and walked over to the head. He gingerly pried the diary out of the fang.

Fawkes settled on Harry's shoulder. Harry petted the bird, "Thanks, Fawkes, without you, I doubt I could have survived."

Harry picked up his wand, the sword and the sorting hat. He came back to Ginny, who was now looking in wonder at Fawkes.

"Harry, is that a phoenix?" she asked, wide-eyed.

Harry gave her a small smile, "Yeah, it is. He's actually Dumbledore's. His name's Fawkes."

“What’s it doing here?” she asked, her hand now stroking its tail feathers, gently. Fawkes was now crooning softly, his music lightening the hearts of the two friends.

Harry’s smile widened, “He helped me save you, blinded the basilisk and brought the Sorting Hat.’

Ginny looked down in surprise at the Hat in Harry’s hand, “Why’d he bring the Sorting Hat?”

Harry held up the sword, “This came out of the Hat. I used it to kill the Basilisk.”

They examined the sword, shuddering at the blood encrusted on its blade. Then Harry saw the name on the sword, *Godric Gryffindor*. His heart skipped a beat. He had to tell his dad about this.

He stood up and offered a hand to Ginny, “Come on, Gin. We’ve got to get out of here. Ron will be worried.”

At the sound of her brother’s name, Ginny broke into tears again, “Oh, Harry, I’m going to be expelled for causing all this trouble,” she sobbed.

Harry knelt down and pulled her awkwardly into his arms, similar to what he had done earlier with Rose, yet he felt a strange sensation in his stomach that he hadn’t felt then. He ignored the feeling for now.

“Shh, it’s going to be all right, Ginny,” he said as he slowly rubbed her back, “I’ll explain everything. We’ll show them the diary. Everyone will understand. No one will blame you and you won’t be expelled.”

Ginny pulled back and looked at Harry, tears still streaming from her eyes, “Are you sure? Will Rose and Hermione forgive me?”

Harry felt a pang in his heart at the sight of her tear-streaked face, “Yes, they will. They’ll understand that it wasn’t you but Riddle who did those things.”

Ginny sniffled one last time then stood up. Harry placed the sword and Sorting Hat through his belt and held the diary in one hand, the hand that wasn't clutching Ginny's.

They left the Chamber and found Ron had made a hole in the wall of stone in front of the entrance to the Chamber. They managed to squeeze through the hole.

Then, Fawkes carried the three of them out of the tunnels back to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, and up to Dumbledore's office, bypassing the guardian gargoyle and the winding staircase.

Harry wondered why Fawkes had brought them there since he saw Dumbledore leave the school after Lucius Malfoy had brought him papers dismissing him earlier that evening.

They paused at the door to Dumbledore's inner office, having heard voices inside.

"Now that we know from Ms. Potter where the entrance of the Chamber of Secrets most likely is, what do we do?" a voice said, most likely McGonagall.

"We'll organize a rescue party," said a voice that Harry recognized as his father's, "We'll go into the Chamber after them."

Harry gave Ginny's hand one last gentle squeeze before releasing it and pushing the doors open.

Within the office they saw James, Frank Longbottom, Molly and Arthur Weasley, and Professor McGonagall seated in chairs in front of the Headmaster's desk. Surprisingly, Professor Dumbledore was seated in his usual chair behind the desk. In a corner, Harry saw Lockhart sprawled on the floor, wrapped up with ropes.

"You don't have to go down there, Dad," Harry said as he, Ron and Ginny stepped into the office, "It's over."

Chapter 17: After the Chamber

"It's over," Harry said as he, Ginny and Ron stepped Dumbledore's office after coming from the Chamber of Secrets. Fawkes swooped over to his perch by Dumbledore's side.

After a few moments where everyone, except Dumbledore, looked at them in shock, Mrs. Weasley rushed forward, to embrace her daughter, her husband soon following. James looked shrewdly at his son. Mr. Longbottom and McGonagall were still looking at the scene dumbfounded but Dumbledore was smiling with a twinkle in his eye.

Then, Harry and Ron were pulled into a hug by Mrs. Weasley, "You saved her, you saved Ginny," she said.

Ron was mumbling, "Mum, geroff." Harry felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment. It didn't help that his father was now smirking.

James walked up to his son and placed his hands on the boy's shoulders, "So, what happened, Harry?"

With this question, Mrs. Weasley stepped back from the two boys and guided Ginny gently into a chair. Her parents sat behind her.

Harry placed the Sorting Hat, diary and sword on Dumbledore's table then he and Ron sat down in the chairs beside Ginny's. Harry could sense that she was ready to cry again.

"Now, boys," Dumbledore, said gently, "What happened in the Chamber? How did you figure everything out?"

Harry sighed. Over the next half hour, he told them about Dobby and his warning, hearing the voice, Rose figuring out that the monster was a basilisk, their theory that the entrance of the Chamber was in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, Riddle and the battle in the Chamber.

With Dumbledore's help, Harry also explained about the diary and how Riddle used it to possess Ginny. Mr. Weasley admonished Ginny for trusting the diary. Harry gave a look of sympathy and support as tears again threatened to flow down her cheeks.

Finally, Dumbledore said, "I think it's best that Madame Pomfrey take a look at Miss Weasley to make sure she doesn't have any serious injuries and she should spend the night in the hospital wing to get some rest. Don't worry, my dear. There will be no punishment for what happened. Older and wiser wizarding folk have been duped by Tom Riddle."

Ginny looked relieved then she looked appalled, "Can't Madame Pomfrey look at me here? I don't want to go to the hospital wing. Rose is probably there. How can I face her after what I did to her?"

Dumbledore smiled, "Don't worry, Miss Weasley. I doubt Miss Potter will hold it against you. The friendship you share will overcome any ill feelings this incident may cause. I'm sure she is worried about you and will feel better knowing you are all right."

James knelt down in front of Ginny, "Ginny, you and Rose have been friends since you two could crawl. Down the years, you've had many disagreements and fights, yet you've always made up. Rose will understand that you didn't mean to hex her. She knew you weren't yourself when you went into that bathroom. Professor Dumbledore is right. She'll be more worried about you. So, go on and show her you're out of danger."

Ginny gave a weak nod and allowed her parents to lead her out of Dumbledore's office, taking a moment to look back at Harry, a look of gratitude in her eyes. Harry's heart gave a small leap at that look, confusing Harry.

Then Ron said, "What's Lockhart doing here, all trussed up?"

James laughed, "Oh, you noticed, eh," his expression then changed to disgust, "Well, your esteemed Defense teacher showed his true colors tonight. The git, whoops," he glanced at Dumbledore and McGonagall, the latter scowling at his language, "sorry professors. Your ex-professor was going to make a run for it. It's lucky Frank and I showed up at the Entrance Hall after Minerva called us about Ginny's disappearance." He glared at the prone man, "He actually tried to remove our memories." He turned to the two boys, who were now chuckling and grinning.

"You were right about him then, Dad," Harry said, "I knew it. We were actually going to tell him what we learned about the Chamber and the monster. Who knows what he would have done to us, if we caught him trying to leave."

James grinned, "I've no doubt you would have handled him well enough, son." He turned to Frank Longbottom, "Frank, I think you should get the former professor over to the Ministry. I need to stay here, check on my daughter and make sure my son is fine."

Mr. Longbottom grinned, "Sure, James. Check on that son of mine while you're at it, okay." He then waved his wand over Lockhart, "Mobilicorpus." Lockhart floated ahead of him out the door.

"Come along, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall said, "I think Madame Pomfrey should check you out also. I believe that Madame Pomfrey is giving the mandrake juice to those who were petrified."

"Good," Ron said, happily, "That means Hermione is all right. Wait till I tell her what happened. She'll be green with envy over this adventure." He followed McGonagall out of the office.

James then turned to his son, "Seems you're getting into a dangerous habit, son. Last year it was the Stone, now it's a basilisk. I'd hate to think what your mother will say when she finds out." Harry winced.

"I'm sorry, Dad," he said, "you had just gone and I wasn't sure if Lockhart could save Ginny. We had to try to save her. If we hadn't, she'd be dead now and Voldemort would be back, even as a sixteen year old."

James sat down heavily on the seat beside his son. "Yeah, there is that." He turned to Dumbledore, "So, You-Know-Who went to school here, did he?"

Dumbledore sighed, "Yes, he did, James. He was an exceptionally gifted student, one of the most brilliant I've seen. I'm not surprised he came up with that diary. Unfortunately, he was also a puzzle to me. He had only a small group of friends, all from his own House. He was an orphan, you know, born of a witch and muggle father, lived in an

orphanage until he received his Hogwarts letter. He hated going home there every summer.”

“Wait a minute,” James said, “He’s a half-blood, just like Harry. Is that the reason he...” he paused at a look from Dumbledore who nodded slightly toward Harry.

Harry didn’t catch what his father was going to say as his attention was focused on the sword he had pulled out of the Sorting Hat. “Dad, Professor, this sword, I pulled it out of the Hat. Take a look at it.”

Dumbledore and James looked at it and saw the name, causing both of them to gasp.

James turned to Dumbledore, his voice filled with awe, “Albus, is this really Godric Gryffindor’s sword?”

Dumbledore reverently stroked the hilt, “I believe so, James. I’ve read descriptions of it but it hasn’t been seen in hundreds of years, not since it was buried with him.”

“Then, how did Harry get hold of it?” James said, “Is it related to...?”

Harry looked suspiciously at Dumbledore and his father. What were they hiding? Why was Dumbledore here when he was supposedly relieved by the School’s Board of Governors.

Just then, the doors of the office opened again and Lucius Malfoy stepped in. He was followed by a small creature.

“Dobby,” Harry cried, “So you work for the Malfoys.”

Malfoy glared at the house elf and said, “I’ll deal with you later.” He turned back to Dumbledore, obviously ignoring the Potters.

“So, you’re back,” he said, sneering.

“Yes, Lucius,” Dumbledore said, leaning back in his chair, “When the Board heard that Arthur Weasley’s daughter had been kidnapped, they seemed to reconsider their position and told me that I could return to Hogwarts.”

"I see," Lucius said, "Well, I think they'll change their minds when the attacks continue."

"Oh, haven't you heard, Lucius?" James then spoke up, "the perpetrator has been caught and the attacks will stop. Even the monster is dead."

Lucius turned to glare at James, "Oh, really? And pray tell, who was responsible for these horrible attacks?"

"It was Voldemort," Dumbledore said, "just like the last time. Only this time, he worked through somebody else with the help of an artifact of his." He pointed to the diary.

Harry was watching Dobby who was pointing to the diary and then to Malfoy, before hitting himself hard with his own fist.

"Yes, Lucius," James said, "It's a curious thing, that diary. Quite a dangerous thing, too. I wonder if it's familiar to you. Perhaps, it's something you lost or purposely misplaced."

"HOW DARE YOU, Potter?" Malfoy said, glaring at James.

"Oh, I dare very much, Malfoy," James said, moving toward the silver-haired man until their noses were almost touching, "You planted that diary in Ginny Weasley's cauldron that day we met in Diagon Alley. Was it some last minute instructions from your precious Dark Lord, before he bought it?"

"I'd like to see you prove that, Potter," Malfoy said.

"Oh, that would be difficult now, Lucius," Dumbledore said, "now that the diary is destroyed."

"Yes, a real pity," James said, "It seemed quite a clever plan. Imagine the shock to our world if it became known that the daughter of Arthur Weasley was attacking muggleborns. His credibility as Deputy Minister would be destroyed. Fortunately, my son and Ginny's brother, Ron, stopped it, even killed the monster in the Chamber of Secrets. That plan is now a dismal failure. I know your former master so hated failure."

Malfoy paled. "Yes, Your son was quite fortunate," he said. He turned to the house elf, "Come on, Dobby. We're leaving." He then kicked the house elf toward the door.

"Oh, Lucius," James said, making the silver haired man turn around, "I wouldn't try spreading any more of the Dark Lord's school things around if I were you. I'm sure my wife can come up with a spell that will trace it back to you."

Lucius merely glared and turned around, whacking Dobby again on the bum.

Harry then whispered to his Dad, "I've got an idea to help Dobby."

He asked Dumbledore for the diary and placed a sock in it. He hurried after Lucius Malfoy and forced him to take the diary back. Malfoy tossed it to Dobby. When Dobby opened it and found the sock, he was ecstatic since by being given clothes, even unknowingly, by Malfoy, he had been freed.

Lucius Malfoy was furious and tried to hex Harry. Before even James could interfere, Dobby blasted Malfoy backwards. Malfoy glared at them and limped out of the school.

Dobby thanked Harry for helping him get free of the Malfoys and Harry made him promise to stop trying to protect him.

When Dobby had vanished with a click of his fingers, James turned to look at Harry, "That was a good thing you did, son, freeing that house elf. Infuriating Lucius was an added bonus."

"Thanks, Dad." Harry said, grinning at his father.

"Now," James said, "You better get yourself to the hospital wing and let Madame Pomfrey look you over. I hope most of that blood isn't yours."

"Nope," Harry said, "It's mostly the basilisk's. It was really messy when I cut its head off."

“Good,” James said, “You better check on your sister, too. I’m also sure you want to see if Hermione is unpetrified.”

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said and turned to go.

“Oh, son, by the way,” James said, “you’re grounded for two weeks, and that includes flying.”

“Dad!” Harry whined in indignation.

James smiled at the boy, “Better me than your mum giving you punishment for endangering yourself. She might have grounded you for the whole summer. Speaking of which, I better tell her what happened. She’ll probably want to come over once I tell her the events of tonight. Go on now, off to the hospital wing.”

Harry sighed and walked away from his dad, his good mood over saving Ginny and freeing Dobby evaporating with the prospect of another two weeks of boredom in Potter Manor.

As soon as he was sure his son would continue walking to the hospital wing, James turned around and walked back way they had come. Upon saying the password, “Saltwater taffy”, the gargoyle stepped aside and allowed James to ascend to the Headmaster’s office using the moving stairs.

James knocked on the door and entered after hearing “Enter.” He found Dumbledore examining intently the sword his son had used to kill the basilisk. The headmaster had cleaned it up and it now gleamed brightly, large rubies glittering along its hilt.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Dumbledore said, “As I said earlier, this is Godric Gryffindor’s own sword. I checked it just now against a picture of it in one of my books.”

James moved closer to examine the sword. “A magnificent weapon, better looking than most of the ones we have in the auror training rooms, Albus.”

“Yes, but still sharp as ever, from the ease with which Harry cut the basilisk’s head off,” Dumbledore said.

“So, Albus,” James said, “do you think this has any connection to the prophecy?”

Dumbledore sighed, “I don’t know, James. One thing it does is provide additional proof that your son is descended from Godric Gryffindor by blood. Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled this out of the sorting hat.”

“About that, Albus,” James said, “How did that happen? How did your phoenix know to bring the hat to Harry?”

“Well, James,” Dumbledore said, “Harry must have shown true loyalty to me for Fawkes to come to him in his hour of need. As to the sorting hat, it has been here for far longer than me. It has strange abilities even I don’t know. What is known is that it has a strong affinity to the Light and an ever vigilant opponent to Darkness.”

“Now, I believe you must inform your wife of what has occurred. You can use my fireplace.”

“Thank you, Albus,” James said, striding almost immediately toward the fireplace with the crackling fire.

James bent in front of the fire, threw in some floo powder, placed his face in the green flames and said, “Potter Manor.” He felt the sensations associated with floo travel until he looked into a familiar living room.

“Blinky,” he called.

A few moments later, the house elf appears in the living room, “Master James, you called Blinky?”

“Yes, Blinky,” James said, “Please ask Lily to come down. I need to talk with her.”

A few minutes later, Lily knelt in front of the fire, dressed in a nightgown. “James, what is it? Is something wrong?”

“Well, love, something was wrong tonight but it’s much better now. Unfortunately, it involved your son...and daughter.”

“What? Harry and Rose? What happened, James?”

“I think its best you dress up and come here to Hogwarts, then I and the headmaster can explain it fully.”

An hour later, James had explained the night’s events to his wife. Lily sat at her husband’s side gazing at the sword glittering on Dumbledore’s desk.

“So, let me understand this, Albus,” Lily said, “Once again, our son has thwarted V-V-Voldemort, beaten him a third time.”

Dumbledore said, “Yes, Lily. Though technically, this time it was his sixteen year-old self Harry defeated, in essence, that is what happened.”

Lily blew out a breath, “Three times already. Does this have anything to do with the prophecy?”

“As I told your esteemed husband, Lily, I don’t know.” Dumbledore said, “Prophecy is a vague thing. At times it is self-fulfilling. James was insinuating earlier if being a half-blood was what caused Voldemort to choose Harry that night he almost killed all of you. I’m not sure. It is difficult to delve into the thinking of a madman. For all we know, he could have randomly chosen Harry, and then gone on to kill Neville Longbottom once he had killed your son, just to make sure.”

After a few minutes of silence, Lily stood up and placed her hands on the desk, sending a glare at Dumbledore. “How could you have let this get so far, Albus? Last year, with Quirrell, at least only Harry and his friends were involved. This year, both my children were in danger plus several other students were petrified, including one of their good friends. I always thought you were the most powerful wizard alive. When we were in school, V-V-Voldemort never dared lay a hand here. Now, he has twice touched this school in as many years, both times, involving my son.”

Dumbledore actually cringed as Lily continued to glare at him. James placed his hands on his wife’s shoulders, trying to calm her.

"Please believe me, Lily," Dumbledore said, "I am sorry for what happened last year. It seemed the best place at the time to hide the stone. No one could have suspected Quirinius of being a host to Voldemort, especially a willing one, having known him for years. As for this year's crisis, it was hard to be aware of what was happening to students and be unable to help them. Salazar Slytherin hid his Chamber well. Even now, we cannot open the entrance. I suspect the way to do so involves being a parselmouth. Yet, I would not ask Harry or Ginny to help us in that regard. Their experience there was horrible and need not be repeated. I wish I could reverse what has happened but I'm afraid it would be tempting Fate to do so."

Lily continued to glare at Dumbledore, "I hope you're more successful in preventing things like this in the future, Albus. Now, I want to see my son and daughter." She turned to James, "Shall we, dear?"

"Um, you go ahead, Lils," James said, "I've already made sure they're all right. I have a few more things to discuss with Albus. I'll join you in a while."

Lily looked suspiciously at James, but then she said, "All right. I'll see you later. Albus."

When his wife had left, James turned back to the headmaster. "Albus, Harry handled himself well enough tonight, but he had help. He may not be so lucky next time."

"Next time, James?" Dumbledore asked.

James blew a breath out as he sat down. He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes with the fingers of one hand.

"You know that someday that prophecy will be fulfilled. Somehow, Voldemort will regain his powers and body. I want Harry to be ready for that. I want him to beat the bloody bastard once and for all and live. No matter what, I want to see my son have his own family. To do that, he needs to learn things not normally the curriculum of Hogwarts, yet I don't want to take him from his friends or some semblance of a normal life."

“What are you saying then, James?” Dumbledore asked, though he had an idea what the elder Potter had in mind.

“Well, it’s something I had started to think about while we waited for Lily. I hope she will go along with it, Albus. Some of the things I plan may not be to her liking. So, this is what I plan to do.”

When Harry got to the hospital wing, Madame Pomfrey immediately made him sit in one of the beds as she ran her wand over him, checking for injuries. In the other beds, he could see Ginny and Rose talking quietly, Molly and Arthur Weasley sitting across from them. A screen still separated the petrified students from the rest of the ward.

Except for some minor cuts and bruises, which were easily healed, Madame Pomfrey pronounced Harry fit. However, she still insisted on him spending the night in bed. She allowed him to visit his sister and friends before sleeping.

Harry walked over to Rose’s bed. He noticed that Ginny had now moved away and was being put to bed by her mother.

“Hey, sis. I’m glad you’re okay.” He reached over and hugged her.

“Thanks, big brother,” she said, smiling and hugging him back.

Harry looked at Rose then at Ginny. “So, are you two okay with each other?”

Rose sighed and gave a sad smile, “Well, somewhat. I told her I didn’t blame her for hexing me. I mean, she was under the control of a slimy git. But we still have a few issues to settle. Her need to confide in someone else, even in a diary, was a bit hard for me. We used to tell each other everything. Now, it seems she was keeping secrets.”

Harry placed his hand on her shoulder, “Come on now, you’ve had fights before. Remember when you were both six and you thought she lost that Barbie doll Mum gave you for Christmas? You got really mad and refused to let her come over for a whole week.”

"Yeah, then I found out that the twins had accidentally made it vanish, but didn't tell her." Rose's cheeks turned pink as she remembered her embarrassment then, "When their Mum forced a confession out of them, I had to beg Ginny to come over to play. Then we turned the twins' hair blue for a whole day for that." Rose was now smiling.

"See," Harry said, grinning himself, "You two always made up. You've been friends for so long, it's hard to stay apart. You'll get through this. Just give her some space and be there for her. Riddle was awful to her. I just don't know how much."

"You're right, Harry," Rose said, "We've been friends for too long to allow a slimy git like that Riddle to get between us. Thanks." She gave him another hug.

"All right," Harry said, "You get some sleep. I need to check on Hermione and the others. Have you seen Ron?"

"Oh, he was here until a few minutes before you came," Rose said, "He looked in on Hermione just after Madame Pomfrey had unpetrified her. They talked for a while then they started having a row. Madame Pomfrey threw him out then. His parents were scowling at him when he left in a huff. Is that the way they are usually with each other?"

Harry sighed, "Unfortunately, once in a while. It's just worse in the last couple of months before Hermione got petrified. I wonder what Ron said that started it. He did say something about teasing her about missing our trip down to the Chamber."

"Maybe that was it," Rose said, "Frankly, I'm glad I didn't see that place. From what little Ginny had told me so far, it's a terrible place."

"Yeah, too many snakes," Harry said, "Okay, get some rest, sis." He pulled the covers over her and tucked her in.

Harry moved to the screen and peeked around it. Obviously unpetrified but asleep in separate beds were Colin, Justin and the vaguely familiar Ravenclaw prefect. Harry thought he saw her one time walking in the corridor with Percy.

On the furthest bed, he saw Hermione sitting up and wide awake, her head in a book. *Blimey, is she revising? She just got unpetrified, for Merlin's sake.*

He slowly approached her bed and said, "Hey."

She looked up and smiled at him, putting the book down after carefully marking her place. "Harry, I'm so glad you're all right. I heard from Ronald you solved the mystery of the Chamber and saved Ginny Weasley." Her tone had changed when she said Ron's name.

Harry blushed, "Uh, yeah. Actually, Rose helped us guess what the monster was, based on things you said." He then gave her a detailed account of what happened since she got petrified. Hermione only interrupted him twice, once to say she also believed Hagrid was innocent and the second time to praise Harry for being true to Dumbledore.

After he had related what happened with Dobby, Hermione smiled and said, "Your Dad's right, Harry. Giving that house elf his freedom is a very good deed."

Harry smiled, "I'm glad I did that. So, what did Ron say to you?"

Hermione's smile was replaced by a scowl. "Sometimes he just infuriates me. He starts off shaking my hand and saying how glad he is that I'm all right and unpetrified. Then he commented that I'd have competition in the brains department as Rose was the one who figured out what the monster was. So I told him that I already knew it was a basilisk and was just on my way to tell you lot about that."

"Then what did he say?" Harry said.

"He said I didn't have to fib to prove I was the smarter one," Hermione said, furious now, "He actually thought I'd lie about that just to say I had done it first. I thought he was my friend and would know I wouldn't lie about something like that. I called him a git for that and he stormed out."

Harry sighed, "Hermione, I've known Ron longer than you. At times, he can be tactless and unintentionally hurtful with his words. But, he

did say you were the smarter one, didn't he, even if he said it like that?"

"Oh, right, I guess he did," she said, a little flustered now."

"I'll talk to him tomorrow and explain what you were mad about," Harry said, "Then, you two talk it over, okay?"

"Okay, so are you all right?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, just a few cuts and bruises Madame Pomfrey healed easily," Harry said.

"Okay, go get some sleep, Harry," Hermione said, I, on the other hand, had had enough sleep. I have to get back to revising."

Just as Harry was about to say something, they heard the doors of the hospital wing open. Peeking around the screen, Harry's eyes widened as he saw his mother talking with Madame Pomfrey and the elder Weasley.

Great, he thought. "It's my Mum," he told Hermione, "I better face her now than later." *At least she can't yell at me here or she'll awaken the others.*

Blowing out a breath, he walked around the screen to meet his fate. Lily was now sitting on the bed beside that of Rose, watching her daughter sleep.

To his surprise, his mother didn't glare furiously at him but patted the space beside her, indicating he should sit there. When Harry warily sat beside her, he was further surprised by the fierce hug she gave him that rivaled the one Mrs. Weasley had given him earlier in Dumbledore's office.

Harry gratefully accepted the hug, which lasted longer than usual. Finally, Lily released her son and drew back, looking shrewdly at him.

"What am I ever going to do with you?" she asked, "Last year, it was saving that Stone, and this year, it was saving your sister's best friend.

You have quite a penchant for getting in trouble to save others, Harry."

"I know, Mum," Harry said, "I just couldn't stand there and do nothing. You probably heard from Dad that Lockhart was going to make a run for it instead of trying to save Ginny. I had to try to help. She's my friend, too aside from being my best friend's sister and my sister's best friend."

Lily shook her head, "I can't really blame you. Your sister's actions show it's probably genetic, considering your parents defied the Dark Lord thrice and have dangerous jobs."

Harry raised an eyebrow, "Mum, I know being an auror is dangerous, but your job can't be as dangerous. I mean, researching new spells isn't that dangerous."

Lily raised an eyebrow of her own, "I'll have you know, Harry, that that includes experimenting with the new spell once its worked out. It can be a tad dangerous, like the Weasley twins' experiments for their pranks."

"Oh," Harry said, "well, I guess that makes sense to test the new spells."

"Now, we'll talk about what you did tonight another time," Lily said, "for now, you need to rest." She helped Harry into the bed and under the covers. "Sleep well, darling." She bent down to kiss him on the cheek.

"Mum! Please, not in front of the Weasleys." Harry whined sleepily. After a few moments, he was fast asleep, his dreams now mixed with visions of a pale, freckled face framed by flaming red hair.

Chapter 18: End of another schoolyear

The next morning, Harry, Hermione and Rose were allowed out of the hospital wing in time for breakfast. Ginny, on the other hand, had to remain for a few more days to rest. The other three spent a few minutes reassuring her that they would be back to visit later.

The Potter and the Weasley adults had spent the night in the hospital wing, at their children's side. Lily and James left after making their children promise to keep out of trouble for the remaining days of the term. Arthur and Molly returned to Ginny's bedside after a quick breakfast.

Harry, Hermione and Rose ascended to Gryffindor Tower to change clothes. Harry was surprised to find Ron still in their dormitory.

"Hey, Ron," Harry said, "Why aren't you down at breakfast yet?"

"I wanted to wait for you and Hermione, Harry," Ron said, "And I haven't thanked you yet for saving my sister."

He suddenly pulled Harry into a hug reminiscent of his mother's, pounding him on the back.. Harry was surprised at first but returned the hug and pounded Ron's back a couple of times.

"You're welcome, Ron," Harry said, after Ron let go, "Remember, she's my friend, too, almost like another sister." He grinned at Ron.

"Yeah, I know," Ron said, also grinning, "Just so you know, Rose is like a sister to me, too."

"Speaking of sisters, just what did you say to Hermione last night?" Harry asked, raising one eyebrow, "She seemed put out by it."

Ron turned red as his hair, "Well, um, I just wanted to tease her. I mean, she's brilliant and everything but she can be a bit intimidating with what she knows. I thought it would be fun to point out to her that there's someone who can be her match in class."

"Well, she didn't take that comment about fibbing very well," Harry said, "You should apologize to her and say you didn't mean that."

"You're right; I didn't mean that," Ron said, "I'll tell her I'm sorry. Where is she, still in the hospital wing?"

"Nope, she's just changing in her dorm. We can meet her and Rose in a bit."

Harry changed quickly and the two boys descended the stairs to the common room just as Hermione and Rose were about to step out of the portrait hole.

"There you two are," Rose said, "we thought you had already left for the Great Hall."

"Nope, sis," Harry, "I was just explaining something to Ron." He then nudged Ron and shook his head toward Hermione.

Ron approached Hermione with trepidation. "Um, Hermione, I'm sorry for saying you were lying about being the first to think that the monster in the Chamber was a basilisk. I didn't mean it. You're the smartest person I know. It just gets a bit intimidating sometimes."

Hermione looked shrewdly at Ron for a moment before smiling a little, "Okay, Ron. I forgive you." Then she pulled out her wand and pointed it at Ron's face. "But don't you ever accuse me of lying again."

Ron gulped and said, "N-n-never again. Right." He scowled at the smirks on Harry and Rose's faces.

The four Gryffindors left the Tower and headed down for breakfast.

When they entered the Great Hall, the noise caused by the gathered students suddenly dissipated. As they walked toward the Gryffindor table, the interrupted conversations resumed. The four sat down with relief and Ron immediately began piling his plate with food.

Harry had sat down beside Neville. He turned to his fellow Gryffindor second year. "Neville, thanks for helping my sister get to the hospital wing last night."

Neville's cheeks turned a little pink, "Think nothing of it, Harry. I was glad to help." He leaned over to whisper to Harry, "It's just one Marauder helping another. We take care of our own, right?"

"Thanks just the same," Harry said, "It's a pity we haven't had time for one last prank what with exams and all." He turned his attention to the food, barely noticing that Rose was very intent on her own plate.

A few minutes later, Professor Dumbledore rose to his feet and called for the students' attention.

"My dear students, as you may have heard last night, one of your number was abducted by the monster in the Chamber of Secrets. Well, I have the pleasure to tell you that that student is safe and sound and the monster destroyed, through the selfless actions of two of your peers. While I cannot name the student abducted or the ones who saved her, rest assured they will be well rewarded with plaques for special services to the school. In addition, I have two more announcements. Since the events of the past month connected with the Chamber have been quite troubling to all and have probably affected your concentration on your studies, all exams are hereby cancelled as are classes for today. You will all relax instead and prepare for a spectacular feast that will be held tonight to celebrate the rescue and the monster's demise. Now, enjoy your day."

The entire Hall erupted in cheers and applause, except for where Hermione was as she was getting upset over not having to do the exams anymore. Harry and Ron joined the cheering students, clapping each other's backs.

Fred and George appeared beside the two, each placing a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Harry, we heard from Mum and Dad....," Fred said.

"....what you did for Ginny and we just wanted to say," George continued.

They suddenly pulled Harry into a hug, "Thank you!"

Harry felt a bit embarrassed at this unfamiliar show of affection from the twins, but he awkwardly patted their backs as he mumbled "It's okay."

The students soon left the Great Hall to enjoy the day. Harry and his friends spent the rest of the morning visiting Ginny in the hospital wing. No one brought up the Chamber or what had happened the night before. Harry sensed Ginny's relief at that, but he wondered why he could feel it. After lunch, they allowed Ginny to sleep as she was still tired from her ordeal.

The feast that night was a very satisfying one as the food was even better than the usual fare. There was a bit of tension in the air as the students seemed to realize that it was a perfect opportunity for a prank from the new marauders. However, Harry had told the others that he wanted the students to celebrate the end of the threat of the Chamber in peace so the night passed without any untoward incidents.

The bonus of this was that the student body was not prepared for what happened a few days later during the Leaving Feast. Ginny was finally out of the hospital wing and looked quite happy, seated between Rose and Hermione. Anyone who knew the identities of the new marauders would have realized that this fact was as good a reason for the group of pranksters to celebrate as the fact that it was the eve of summer vacation.

The evening looked normal enough as the students began eating the wonderful feast in front of them. However, about an hour after the feast had started, things started to happen in the Slytherin side of the Great Hall.

First, their entire table was replaced by a stage. Then, the students of Slytherin house all changed. A third of them turned into clowns and began to jump around and juggle balls. Another third changed into acrobats and started tumbling and performing tricks on a set of seesaws and a trampoline. Finally, the remaining Slytherins, including Draco Malfoy and his two cronies turned into ballet dancers and started doing pirouettes and splits.

The rest of the students were hooting with laughter and clapping their hands at the Slytherins' antics. Snape was repeatedly waving his wand around, trying to restore the Slytherins to normal but nothing he tried helped. Finally, he simply sat back down in disgust, a scowl on his face. The rest of the professors tried to keep quiet but failed to keep silent or hold their laughter.

Finally, the Slytherins finished their routines with a flourish and stood still, their faces red with embarrassment. When they found that they could move freely, the whole house ran out of the Great Hall, the laughter and applause of the other students ringing in their ears.

Snape glowered at the Gryffindor table for a full minute before rising from his seat, intent on following his students. Then, with a puff of smoke, his clothes changed to a pink ballerina outfit while his face acquired the look of a clown. He looked down at his new look then raised his head high and solemnly walked out of the hall, which had become quiet at the sight of the Potions Master's change.

The silence hung in the air for a good two minutes after Snape had left before being broken by a loud outburst of laughter. This was followed by applause and cheering as another sign magically appeared above the hall's entrance, reading:

A FAREWELL PERFORMANCE FROM

THE NEW MARAUDERS

ENJOY THE SUMMER!

The students remaining in the Hall then resumed eating. Harry and his friends exchanged grins, the biggest one on Ginny's face. It seemed a good way to end the term.

A few days later, Harry was sitting at the writing desk by his bedroom window, laboring over his Transfiguration homework. He glanced out the window. In the garden below, his sister and Ginny were seated on the grass, talking.

Harry was glad that the girls' relationship seemed to have recovered from the events of that dreadful night. Yet, somehow, Harry felt that

Ginny wasn't completely back to her cheerful and mischievous self. To him, her smiles seemed somewhat forced at times.

He wondered if Rose had noticed this. As he pondered this, he heard a knock on his door.

His father opened the door without waiting for an invitation to enter and let himself and Lily in. They sat on the edge of Harry's bed, facing him. Harry ignored them and kept his back to them, as he resumed concentrating on his homework.

Finally, Lily said, "Harry, please don't ignore us. We aren't punishing you for saving Ginny. We just wish you had gone to an adult for help."

"Like Lockhart?" Harry asked, his back still turned to them.

"Well, maybe not him," James said. When Harry didn't answer him, he said, "Please turn around and face us, Harry."

Harry sighed and dropped his quill. He turned around to face his parents. "Come on, Dad, who would we have gone to? As far as we knew, Dumbledore was gone. We heard McGonagall tell Lockhart to go rescue Ginny. We didn't know she was just getting rid of him before calling you. We were desperate. After the attack on Hermione, the thought of Ginny the same way or worse, dying, well, we just sort of panicked."

"Just the same, son, you should know you could have counted on me," James said, "Nothing would keep me from helping my kids or their friends." He placed his hand on Harry's shoulder, "I would die for you."

Harry looked down and gulped, "I know you would, Dad." He then looked up at his father, "I would, too, for anyone I care about."

James and Lily glanced at each other. After an uncomfortable silence, James said, "Well, you were lucky this time, son."

"I know, Dad. If it wasn't for Fawkes, I don't think Ginny or I would have gotten out of that chamber alive."

“Yes, that’s probably true,” James said, “Look, Harry, we didn’t come up here simply to talk about what happened. You see, it’s become clear to us that you may find yourself in this kind of situation again in the future and I think you should be better able to handle things. So, I’ve come up with a summer project to help you while away the time once you are done with your summer assignments.”

“What sort of project, Dad?” Harry asked, his eyes narrowing.

Well,” James said, looking warily at Lily, “I think you should learn a bit more of spellwork than you’d get at Hogwarts.”

“You mean like the spells aurors use?” Harry asked, his eyes widening.

“Yes, some of that,” James said, “Also, you should learn a bit of self defense, the muggle way, which means some of the martial arts. We aurors learn them as part of our training. I think it’ll do you good.”

Harry grinned, “That’s brilliant, Dad. I’d like that a lot.”

James grinned back, “I thought you would.”

“Dad,” Harry said, “can you also teach my friends, at least the martial arts bit? I’m sure they could use it.”

James looked thoughtful for a moment, “All right, Harry. I guess Ron and Hermione can join you when we do martial arts. In fact, I think its best if Rose also learned self defense.”

“Um, how about Ginny?” Harry asked, his ears heating up a bit.

James raised an eyebrow while looking at him. His mother just grinned at him, a twinkle in her eye.

“Well, sure,” James said, “If Rose learns self defense, I guess she’ll insist her best friend also learn. I’ll talk to Arthur and Molly about it, clear it with them.”

Harry smiled, “Thanks, Dad. It won’t be a boring summer, after all.”

James laughed, "No, it won't. Though I have to warn you, I won't pull any punches. I expect you to work hard. I'm going to treat you like one of our auror recruits."

Harry gulped. He'd seen a bit of how his father worked the recruits. His mother looked like she was struggling to keep from laughing.

His parents then got up from the bed and went out through the door. James looked back at Harry before he closed the door and said, "We'll start tomorrow. We'll be using the duel practice room." Harry could have sworn he saw a twinkle in his father's eye just before the door closed.

Harry stared at the door for several minutes as he thought about the room his father had mentioned. That room on the third floor was one of the few rooms of Potter Manor he had never entered. His father and his uncle Sirius sometimes used it to train, but Harry and Rose had been told not to enter it when they were using it. Harry had always wondered what was in it. The prospect of seeing it for the first time elicited both excitement and dread in him. Grinning at the thought of learning things from his father, Harry turned back to finish his homework.

Chapter 19: Summer training and a surprise announcement

Disclaimer: The only things I own in this story are the original characters like Rose.

A/N: Whew! I'm back! I'm sorry for the delay but the Christmas season was hectic. Then I kept on revising this chapter. Anyway, hope you enjoy it.

“*Protego!*” Harry shouted, conjuring a shield that blocked the tickling charm his father had just cast on him, causing it to bounce back.

“That’s good, Harry,” James said, smiling, as he dodged the spell which hit the far wall.

It was Friday afternoon in the last week of July and Harry’s birthday was the next day. For the past three weeks, James had been forcing Harry to wake up at dawn daily and jog 2 laps around their property, which was about five miles around. This was followed by a half-hour of pushups, sit-ups and other calisthenics. At first, Harry could barely walk after the exercises but after four days, his body had adjusted to the exertion.

After a shower and breakfast, James and Harry moved to the Duel Practice room, where they were now. It was a large room on the third floor, about forty feet by thirty feet in size, with a slate floor, covered in mattresses. The walls were stone, like the rest of the house, but reinforced with wards to absorb spell damage.

They spent the morning practicing spellwork. James had been teaching Harry advanced spells, including the shield charm. Rose was seated near the wall, watching them with interest, though she kept glancing at her watch. Harry knew she was counting the minutes and hours, waiting for Ron and Ginny to floo over after lunch

For the last week, the two youngest Weasleys had floored over for the afternoon to learn muggle martial arts, together with Harry and Rose, under Sirius’ tutelage. James had spoken to Arthur and Molly Weasley and convinced them to let their two youngest children learn these things. The four children had been ecstatic about it, though Ron less so, due to the amount of work it required.

However, Molly refused to let her children learn any of the Auror spells James was teaching Harry and Rose, much to Ron and Ginny's disappointment. Harry decided that that wouldn't stop him from teaching his best friends the spells, knowing his father would not mind. Hermione Granger wasn't with the group yet, much to Harry and Ron's disappointment as she was still travelling with her parents.

There was a soft POP behind him, followed by a high-pitched voice, "Master James, Mistress Lily wants you and the children to know that lunch is ready."

"Thank you, Blinky," James said, turning around to face the house elf. "Please tell Lily that we will be down shortly."

"All right, kids," he said, "it's time for lunch. When Sirius, Ron and Ginny get here, maybe the four of you can practice the judo and aikido moves against each other."

Harry and Rose grinned at each other, eager to try the moves their father had taught them.

Sirius arrived in time to eat and then James left for work after lunch. An hour later, Ron and Ginny came over, knapsacks containing extra clothes and the traditional *gi* outfits slung over their shoulders.

Harry felt the now familiar fluttering in his stomach he felt whenever he saw Ginny as well as a feeling of excitement and nervousness apart from his own. He turned to look at Ginny and the feeling increased, followed by a sense of wariness. Harry quickly looked away as Ginny turned her head toward him.

The four kids and Sirius changed into the white *gi* outfits and headed for the Duel Practice room. Sirius led them through the *katas* for an hour then called their attention.

"All right, kids," Sirius said, "you've learned the basic motions and *katas* in judo, aikido and karate. Now, you four pair off, Harry with Ron and Rose with Ginny. Face each other, about five feet apart." He watched the kids comply.

“Now, bow to each other at the waist, like this,” Sirius demonstrated to them, “Then, assume the first defense position. Now, try to strike your partner while blocking him or her, using the hands only, no feet. Don’t put too much force in your attacks for now.”

Sirius watched the two pairs spar. It became apparent after a few minutes that Harry was faster than Ron and managed to block most of the redhead’s strikes. Ginny and Rose, on the other hand, seemed evenly matched, blocking each other’s strikes.

Harry soon noticed that when he looked at Ginny, he could get a feel of what she was going to do next. It distracted him a couple of times and allowed Ron to get a strike in. He could also feel her elation when she managed to get past Rose’s attempts to block her.

After a half-hour of sparring, Sirius saw that both pairs were tiring. However, Harry remained faster than Ron, whereas Ginny and Rose seemed equally tired.

“Right,” Sirius said, “let’s take a break. Sit down over here in front of me.” Once the four children were seated, he continued, “Okay, you guys are doing good. But, you have to work on your endurance. I’ll suggest to James that you three join Harry for his morning run and exercises.”

Sirius almost laughed at the expressions on their faces at his suggestion. Ron looked appalled at the idea, while Ginny and Rose looked at each other and grinned.

“Don’t worry, Ron,” Harry said, a smile on his face, “We’ll start out slow. It’s only slightly more strenuous than flying in Quidditch.” He grinned at his godfather’s attempts to hold his laughter in.

“At least we get a breeze while flying, Harry,” Ron said, “We’re just going to get all sweaty, being July and all. Bloody hell!”

“Ron! Language!” Ginny and Rose said almost simultaneously.

Ron looked at the two in mock horror, “You two have been spending too much time around Hermione.”

“Why, Ronald?” Rose asked, “Do you miss her?” Harry could feel a sense of amusement from Ginny as he glanced at her.

Ron’s cheeks turned pink, “Um, er, well, of course, she’s my friend.”

Harry snickered then just grinned when Ron turned a baleful eye on him.

“All right,” Sirius said, an amused tone in his voice, “I think that’s enough rest. Let’s resume the sparring, okay, same partners.”

In the evening, after refreshing showers, the four children flooded over to Longbottom Manor to attend a birthday party for Neville. They exited the fireplace in a large spacious living room, decorated in red and gold. It seemed as cozy as the living room in Potter Manor.

“Hey, Neville, Happy Birthday!” Harry said as he saw his friend come into the room to greet them. Ron and Ginny joined his greeting while Rose seemed to mumble hers.

“Thanks, guys,” Neville said, a wide grin on his face. Harry thought he saw Neville’s face turn a little pink but couldn’t be sure as he turned to greet Neville’s parents who were right behind their son.

Then, Harry noticed a girl with long brown hair peeking from behind Mr. Longbottom’s legs.

“Oh,” Neville said, turning around to look behind him, “You haven’t met my sister, yet. Come on, Maggie, say hello.” He turned back to them, “This is Margaret Ann, Maggie for short. She’s ten and will be going to Hogwarts next year. She was visiting some of our relatives in America last year so she wasn’t here then for that joint party Harry and I had then.” He then introduced his four friends to Maggie, who shyly nodded her head at them.

Ginny and Rose rushed over to the girl and Ron and Harry said “hi” to her. Harry felt a feeling of glee at finding a younger girl to make friends with, another feeling that wasn’t his own.

They then proceeded outside to the garden where the rest of the guests like Dean, Seamus, Lavander Brown and the Patil twins were

already enjoying the party as the sun set. Over all, it was a great party and it was almost eleven when the Potter and Weasley siblings went their separate ways home, full and tired.

Later, Harry lay on his bed, mulling the foreign feelings and thoughts he had been feeling for most of the summer, as well as the strange feeling in his stomach whenever he saw Ginny.

What's happening to me? Are these strange feelings I've been getting coming from Ginny? Why could I sense what moves she was going to do against Rose right before she did them? Am I reading her mind? Do I fancy her?

Harry finally fell asleep after a couple of hours, still with no answers. When he woke up a few hours later, he saw that the sun was just rising. He glanced at his closet door and saw the calendar hanging there. Seeing the date, he grinned as he remembered that it was his birthday and his father had given the four kids the day off to celebrate.

He quickly got up, remembering the wake-up call his sister had given him the year before. He did his morning ablutions in the bathroom and changed from his pajamas before running down.

A chorus of 'Happy Birthdays' greeted him when he passed into the kitchen. His parents and sister were there with the house elves, holding another huge birthday cake, this one lit up with thirteen candles. A wide grin formed on Harry's face as he relished the fact that he was now a teenager, almost a man, just four years more to coming of age in the wizarding world.

Harry stammered his thanks as he sat down at the kitchen table, still in awe of being thirteen. Then, Rose ran up to him, a mischievous smile on her face.

"Happy thirteenth birthday, big brother!" she said as she laid a kiss on his cheek.

Harry's eyes grew wide while his cheeks turned red. His sister hadn't kissed him since he was six. Then his eyes narrowed in suspicion. She seemed to be in a good mood, in spite of the fact that she hadn't started his birthday with a prank, like last year, or did she?

The second that thought left his brain, he noticed some sort of white powder on the table under his hands then he felt himself change, shrinking in size and growing feathers, white feathers, and a beak. He was now looking up at the table from the edge of the chair he had been sitting on.

Then, he heard his mother shout, "ROSE LILY POTTER! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO YOUR BROTHER? ON HIS BIRTHDAY OF ALL DAYS!"

Rose merely smirked and said, in an innocent voice, "What, Mum? Oh, don't worry, birthday boy will change back in a while. Can't let him have all the fun today, can I?"

His mother simply glared at Rose then at his father as James was clearly holding his laughter in with his hand jammed in his mouth.

Sure enough, after a few seconds, Harry's feathers and beak fell off and he grew back to his old size. Harry just shook his head, a small smile on his face, unwilling to let the prank ruin his good mood or day.

The family then settled to a good breakfast, while Lily placed a preserving charm on the cake for later.

After breakfast, Harry and Rose watched some Saturday morning cartoons on the television for an hour, and then went into the back for some aerial tag on their brooms.

Neither Ron nor Ginny put in an appearance by lunchtime and Harry and Rose assumed that the Weasley siblings had slept late due to their late night out at Longbottom Manor. They knew that those two were not morning persons.

True enough, Ron and Ginny came by the floo two hours later. They greeted Harry enthusiastically and Harry felt warmth on his face and ears and flutterings in his stomach when Ginny gave him a peck on the cheek. Harry felt a wave of embarrassment and concern which was separate from his feelings, along with a stray thought wondering 'what possessed me to do that?'

Whoa, he thought, that definitely was not me.

To distract himself, Harry challenged Ron to a game of Wizard chess. Unfortunately, the girls decided to watch, causing Harry to lose more spectacularly than usual. Ron just smirked as he prepared the board for another game. After losing two more times in less than 30 minutes, Harry decided it was time to go flying.

The two pairs of siblings then played two-on-two Quidditch with brother-sister teams instead of the usual same-sex teams of previous years. They then found that Ginny's skill was slightly better than Rose's, while Ron was definitely worse than Harry as a seeker. The Weasley siblings were able to keep a slight lead over the Potter children, even when Harry was getting stray thoughts of Ginny's planned moves. Harry had a feeling that she was anticipating some of his own moves.

About an hour into the game, Neville arrived by the floo with his sister, Maggie (who Harry had invited), followed almost instantly by Hermione. Neville introduced Maggie to Hermione who was glad to have another girl in the group. They then settled down to watch the game while sitting on the chairs on the porch.

The four players stopped their game once the Weasleys reached a score of 200, though the Potters were not far behind with 190 points. Ginny had scored the last point by stealing the quaffle from Harry. Rose scowled at her brother, who could feel a wave of amusement coming from the other red-haired girl.

Harry then talked to Neville and Hermione about joining them in martial arts training, which the two agreed to on the condition that they got their parents' permission.

Soon, the other Weasleys arrived, along with Sirius, Remus, Neville's parents, Dean, Seamus, Lavender, the Patil twins, Oliver Wood, Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet.

Dinner was held in the garden, on a long table. Afterwards, they had Harry's cake and some ice cream. Harry then got to open the presents he had gotten. He loved all of his presents, especially the dragonhide arm holster for his wand that his parents and sister had given him and one from the Weasleys.

He had gotten a feeling of apprehension and worry when he had started to unwrap the gift from his red-haired friends, followed by a feeling of relief when he grinned and thanked the Weasleys for the new broom compass. The evening ended with everyone feeling contented and happy.

The following Monday, Ron, Rose and Ginny joined Harry for the morning run and exercises. To make it easy for the other three, James had them do only 1 lap around their property. At the end of the five mile run, Harry hadn't even felt warmed up. He was surprised that Ginny and Rose were not too tired. Ron, however, was on his hands and knees. James allowed them to rest for ten minutes before having them do pushups, sit ups and other exercises. Ron and Ginny joined them for breakfast then flooed home to freshen up and attend to some chores around the Burrow.

After lunch, they returned for their martial arts training and Neville and Hermione, who had gotten their parents' permission, joined them. Maggie Longbottom came along to watch. The two newcomers paid much attention to the instruction provided by Sirius and their friends. By the following week, Hermione and Neville had learned enough to allow all six children to spar with each other, even the boys against the girls. Sirius allowed them to use all the moves he had taught them.

Harry noticed that whenever he and Ginny sparred with each other, each could barely get past the other's blocks, as if they could anticipate the other's move. Whenever they made eye contact, he could feel her feelings and hear her thoughts more clearly, like another voice in his head. It seemed both of them quickly looked away whenever that happened.

Unfortunately, Hermione turned out to be the slowest and least skilled during their sparring sessions, which was a bit upsetting to her. Surprisingly, it was Ron who helped her, usually pairing up with her and praising her when she managed to block his strikes. Harry didn't miss the slight reddening of his friends' ears during these times.

Ginny's birthday was, again, celebrated in the Burrow with a great lunch party. Aside from the Weasleys and Potters, other invited guests included Hermione, Neville and his sister, Colin Creevey, a

couple of Ginny's dormmates, Melinda Pipper and Lisa McDougal and a girl in Ginny's year in Ravenclaw, Luna Lovegood.

Harry discovered that Luna lived nearby with her father, a widower, who ran the tabloid, the Quibbler. He had heard of it, sometimes being scoffed at by his father for its tendency to print stories of mythical beasts. They also discovered that Luna had a tendency to make odd pronouncements and statements, as they learned during the party.

Colin had prevailed upon the party guests to have a picture taken after they had eaten and the only seat left for Harry to take was on Ginny's right side. Harry had ducked his head while sitting down to hide the blush that had appeared on his face.

After the picture was taken, Luna approached him and Ginny and said in a dreamy voice, "You know the two of you make a good couple, photographically speaking, maybe in other ways, too." Harry felt his ears heat up and he quickly got up, saying that he wanted to challenge Ron to a chess game. He felt a wave of annoyance and sadness behind him as he moved away.

Harry avoided being in close proximity to Ginny for the rest of the party, even when she opened her gifts. When the gift Harry and Rose had given her was revealed to be a diary, Harry felt a wave of alarm and fear from her. Harry felt his heart constrict. It had been his idea to get the diary for her, a muggle diary with a lock to prevent unwanted intrusion, as a way to help her get over the last term's problems.

Rose, who was beside her, whispered something to her. Ginny looked up at him and smiled, mouthing a 'thank you' to him. He felt his ears and face burning as he felt her gratitude. He smiled back and mouthed a 'you're welcome.' Harry enjoyed the feeling of happiness and joy that he then felt from her. He didn't mind the fluttering in his stomach.

Then he noticed the looks of mischief on Fred and George's face as they looked between him and Ginny. He didn't want to think about what they might do. Of course, he was sure Ginny would give her a taste of her infamous Bat Bogey hex if they got out of hand.

The other party guests soon left, including Harry's parents, leaving Harry, Rose, Hermione, Neville and Maggie, who had all been invited to dinner. They talked with Ginny, Ron and the twins about the coming term, Quidditch and their training for the rest of the evening.

James allowed kids the day off the following day and let them enjoy themselves. Even Maggie came over. They played Quidditch and even few muggle games like tag.

Their Hogwarts letters arrived two days later, as they sat down to breakfast. Rose took the letters from the school owls, giving them a bit of bacon. She gave Harry his before opening hers.

James looked over at his son, "So, Harry, what elective subjects are you taking this term?" Harry had

Harry looked back at his father, "Well, Dad, um, I decided to take Care of Magical Creatures, Ancient Runes and Divination."

"Why are you taking Divination?" his mother asked, raising an eyebrow. Harry knew she thought it was all rubbish. She had said so last term when he had written to ask for advice on his electives

"Because Ron's taking it, too," Rose answered before Harry could, "In fact, he chose subjects Ron was taking also."

"Hey," Harry glared at her, "We're only sharing two subjects. He's taking Muggle studies while I'm taking Ancient runes." Rose merely smirked back. Harry turned back to his parents, noting the scowl on his mother's face. Of course, his father was smirking like his daughter.

"Harry," Lily said, "that's not a good reason for choosing an elective. You have to choose what you would be interested in."

Harry sighed, "I know that, Mum. It's just that we weren't exactly given enough time to think about it, plus with what was going on at that time, next year's subjects wasn't a topic of high priority."

Lily pursed her lips as she realized what Harry meant.

“Anyway,” Harry continued, “nothing much interests me aside from DADA and Charms. The important stuff is what I need to be an auror.” He looked quickly at his father.

James had a look of pride on his face. He turned to his wife. “Come on, Lils. Lay off the kid. Remember, I took Divination, too, until fifth year.” Lily simply stared at James with a look that said, “we’ll talk about it later.”

Harry and Rose looked at each other in puzzlement at their mother’s reaction. They shrugged and started to eat as they scanned their letters for the list of books they needed.

After lunch, their friends arrived and they discussed the coming term and the subjects they would be taking as they sparred.

The following weekend, the Potters and Weasleys went to Diagon Alley to get their school supplies. They were surprised to see no sign of the Malfoys, for which they were glad, considering what had happened the previous year. However, Harry saw a glimpse of worry on his father’s face.

The next week, Harry noticed his mum looked a little sick whenever they sat down for breakfast. In fact, she hurriedly left the table for the loo on several occasions. He asked his dad about it, but James remarked that she may be just having the flu.

Then, as they sat down to dinner a couple of days before Rose’s birthday, Harry and Rose noted that their mother seemed happier than usual. After they had eaten, Lily stood up and looked at her children and husband with a big smile on her face.

“You’ve all noticed how I seemed out of sorts the last few days,” she said, “Well, I went to St. Mungo’s earlier today and saw Healer Bradshaw, our family healer.”

“What did he say?” James said, a look of concern on his face.

“Well, he said that what I feel is natural for someone in my condition,” she said, smiling at her husband.

“What condition is that?” James asked. Harry and Rose felt apprehensive as they waited for their mother to answer.

Lily grinned then said, “I’m pregnant.”

Chapter 20: Start of term

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything associated with it except the characters I have created like Rose Potter and Maggie Longbottom.

Flashback to the last chapter:

Lily said, "I'm pregnant."

The other three Potters stood around in shock for a moment. Then, Rose squealed and ran up to hug her mother. James stood up with a dazed expression on his face. Harry leaned back in his chair, stunned by the news.

James walked up to his wife and put his arms around her shoulders as Rose stood back. He looked in her eyes and asked, "Really? We're having another baby?"

Lily looked up at her husband with a smile and said, "Yes, James. After all these years, we get to have another little one."

Harry's face then broke into a grin as he thought *I'm going to have another sister, or better yet, a brother.* He then moved up to his parents and, together with his sister, hugged them.

After a few seconds, James said, "Hey, wait a minute. You better sit down, love. Harry, Rose, let your mother sit." He pulled Lily back to the table and into a chair.

"Now, you just sit there, Lils," he said, "Don't do a thing. Blinky and the others will take care of everything. Why don't you put up your feet?" He started to move off to the living room, "I'll get you that stool in there to put your feet up on."

Lily started laughing, "James, James, stop. I'm only a month pregnant. I'm not tired."

Rose smirked as she watched her father fussing over her mother. She turned to Lily. "Was he like this when you had me or Harry,

mum?" Her father stopped whatever he was doing to glare at his daughter.

"Oh, yes," Lily said, a twinkle in her eye, "The minute he found out I was pregnant with either of you, he insisted I stop work and stay home." She turned to James, smiling, "Come on now, darling, relax. We still have eight months of this. You'll tire yourself out before me. Sit back and let's just eat."

James sighed and sat back in his chair. Then, he grinned, "I'm going to be a father."

"Hey!" Rose and Harry said at the same time, "You're already one."

The following day, Rose and Harry told their friends as they came over for the last session of martial arts training for the summer. Ginny and Hermione were ecstatic at the prospect of a new baby.

"So, Harry," Neville asked, "do you know if it's going to be a boy or girl?"

"Nope," Harry said, "Dad said it was too early. Maybe they'll try to find out in another month or two."

"I hope it's a boy, mate," Ron said, "That'll even out the numbers. There are just too many girls lately."

"Hey! There are not!" the three girls yelled at him. Neville and Harry just shook their heads at Ron's lack of tact.

Sirius was quite happy when he was told of Lily's pregnancy while he and the kids were getting warmed up for their session. He had always told James that two kids wasn't enough and that he and Lily were still young enough to try. He told Harry that he and Remus would probably compete for the honor of being the godfather of the new Potter child when he or she was born.

Later, Harry was able to avoid pairing up with Ginny for sparring. He hadn't yet figured out what was going on between him and his sister's best friend/best friend's sister. He was somewhat looking forward to going back to Hogwarts since it would be easier to avoid her there

until he could understand what was happening. He needed to talk it over with someone.

That night, he knocked softly on the door of Rose's room. Upon hearing her say 'come in,' he entered the room and closed the door quickly.

Rose was on her bed, leaning against the headboard, while reading a book. Looking up, she raised an eyebrow on seeing her brother. "What's up, bro?" she asked him. She glanced at her clock, "It's still too early to wish me happy birthday."

Harry sat down beside her on the bed. "Sis, I've got to talk to you about something, something that has to do with me and Ginny."

Rose put her book down and sat up fully, facing Harry. "What is it, Harry?" She raised an eyebrow, "Don't tell me you two are dating already?" There was an amused tone in her voice.

"No! That's not it," he replied. He took a deep breath then let it out. "Ever since we got to Dumbledore's office after getting out of the Chamber, I've felt feelings that weren't my own. I've noticed those times were when I was with Ginny. During those two weeks I was grounded, I'd sometimes watch you two playing in the grounds and I could feel some sadness and nervousness that slowly gave way to joy, especially as I watched her laugh."

Rose's eyes widened, "What do you mean by that, Harry? Can you sense her emotions?"

Harry sighed again and looked down at the floor, "I don't know, sis. Maybe, I can, it could be more than that. Ever since we started sparring, I could sense what she was going to do. When we play Quidditch, I've had an inkling of where she was going and what she was going to do with the quaffle."

"If that was so, Harry," Rose asked, "then why can't you and Ron beat the two of us?"

"I don't know," Harry said, "There were times when she seemed to be doing the same to me. Lately, whenever our eyes meet, I get a stronger feeling of her and even sense what she sees."

"Have you told anyone else, like Mum or Dad?" Rose asked, her eyes going wider.

"NO!" Harry said, "They might get mad, think I'm a freak or worse, a pervert."

Rose placed a hand on one of Harry's. "No, they won't, Harry," she said, "But they will try to help you figure out what's going on."

Harry sighed a third time, "No, not just yet. I want to figure this out on my own for now, okay? I just needed to tell someone, like you, my sister and her best friend. Just don't you freak out on me."

Rose sighed, "All right, bro. I won't tell anyone yet. But you better tell her."

"I will, eventually," Harry said, "Don't look at me like that. I need to wait for the right time. I don't want her to hate me for it." He got up to leave.

"All right, Harry." Rose said, "Tell me if anything else happens, okay?"

Harry paused at the open door, "Okay, sis. Good night and Happy Birthday." Then he left and closed the door.

Rose looked at the door for a few moments, then she sighed, a slight smile on her lips. "No, brother mine, I don't think she'll ever hate you."

As he headed for his room, he felt relieved that he had told someone about what had been bothering him all summer. The realization that he was feeling some of Ginny Weasley's emotions had appalled and frightened him at first but when he felt her happy, it just seemed to make him happy.

After the events of the past term, he was glad she was better. Still, the few times he had felt her feeling sad and tense had also made him sad. He marveled that she had held out against Tom Riddle's

manipulations for a while, whereas Quirrell had succumbed almost immediately.

Of course, he couldn't tell Rose that he realized that he did fancy Ginny. Nope, not until he told Ginny herself. As to when he would, well, he wasn't sure yet, maybe in a few years.

Rose celebrated her birthday with a lunch party the next day. All their friends were invited, including Melinda, Lisa, Luna and Colin. The food was great. They played some muggle party games and board games.

Rose loved the many gifts she got like a new magical plant from Neville and his sister, a wand holster of her own from Sirius and Remus and new clothes from Ginny and the Weasleys, but she especially loved the one she got from Harry and their parents – a new broom, a Nimbus 2001.

Harry felt a little jealous over his sister's new broom, but laughed as he watched her zoom around above their backyard, whooping with joy. He was surprised when he only felt happiness and contentment from Ginny as she shadowed her best friend on her own broom, a Cleansweep 8, which was handed down to her from the twins.

Later that night, as they sat down to dinner, Harry decided to bring up something that he had been wondering about.

"Dad, how do I continue with my training while I'm at Hogwarts?"

James looked over at his son, "Well, the running and exercise is easy. All you have to do is get up early, like 5am. Just take a lap around Black Lake then do the calisthenics. You should have enough time afterwards for a shower before breakfast."

Harry nodded. He was already used to getting up early. He looked at Rose, who nodded to him. Harry smiled. He knew she'd join him and get their friends to continue their martial arts practice. Maybe they could do that during the weekends.

"Now as to your spell training," James continued, "I've already spoken to Professor Dumbledore about it. Your new Defense Against the

Dark Arts teacher will take over for that, since it may arouse suspicion if I drop by Hogwarts every week. At any rate, with your mum pregnant, I can't be far from home for long."

James ignored the glare that Lily was giving him. They've had several "discussions" already on his overprotective attitude.

"New DADA teacher?" Rose asked, "Who is it? Anyone should be better than Lockhart."

James grinned, "Oh, you've got that right. Anyway, I don't want to spoil the surprise. You both will see tomorrow." He refused to say anything more and they started eating.

Later, Lily made sure that Harry and Rose were fully packed before they went to bed, as she wanted to leave early for King's Cross Station the next day. Harry drifted off to sleep almost as soon as his head hit his pillow.

The Potters got to the station and Platform Nine and Three quarters with plenty of time to spare. Harry and Rose got a compartment near the end of the train and waited for the Weasleys and Hermione to arrive, greeting their other classmates and friends in the meantime.

Hermione arrived first, bringing her trunk and her new cat, Crookshanks. Rose had commented the first time that they saw it in Diagon Alley that it looked strange for a cat. Ginny had suggested that it may have kneazle blood.

Looking out the window, Harry saw Draco Malfoy walking toward the train in his usual arrogant manner. Harry noticed that Draco was accompanied only by his mother, Narcissa. He thought it strange that Lucius Malfoy wasn't seeing his son off. Then, he saw a smaller boy walking behind Narcissa, looking younger than Draco. He had the same blonde hair as Draco, yet he walked despondently with none of the arrogant air as older boy. The boy's face had enough similarity to Draco's to suggest that they were related.

Great, Harry thought, another Malfoy at Hogwarts. He better stay away from me and my friends. Harry refrained from saying anything to Rose or Hermione.

The Weasleys arrived a few minutes to eleven, rushing to the train. The twins said hello to them before moving off to find their classmates. Percy sat with them for a few minutes, his chest puffing out to show off the Head Boy badge pinned there. Thankfully, he excused himself after seeing Harry and Rose weren't impressed.

"I bet he's gone off to find Penny," Ginny said, giggling.

"Penny?" Harry asked. Her giggles sent his stomach into somersaults.

"Penelope Clearwater," Rose answered, "She was the, um, Ravenclaw prefect who got attacked with Hermione." She looked askance at Ginny and Hermione. The two didn't bat an eyelash at her referring to the events last term. Harry, however, felt a momentary stiffening of Ginny, which passed quickly.

"Why would he go look for her?" Harry asked, more to draw the conversation away from those painful events than out of real curiosity.

"She's his girlfriend," Ginny said, giggling again, "I once caught them in an empty classroom, snogging. He's been writing her all summer."

"Eww," Ron said. Hermione rolled her eyes at him.

"Do Fred and George know?" Harry asked, smirking.

"Not yet," Ginny said, "I haven't told them yet. I was trying to decide whether I can use the threat of telling them against Percy. That way, we can get him to back off whenever we pull off pranks."

Harry was impressed. Percy had been suspicious when they pulled that prank during the Leaving Feast, glaring at him and Ron. He realized that the twins would find ways to torment their older brother and his girlfriend. Percy would do anything to avoid that, even let the New Marauders alone to do their pranks.

Harry grinned at Ginny, "Good thinking, Ginny. I believe this year will be a good one for the New Marauders. We just have to be careful about Snape. He probably suspects us but can't prove anything." He felt the joy in Ginny over his approval of her. Truth be told, he in turn

felt happy about making her happy, not minding the fluttering in his stomach as he watched her face light up with a smile.

A little while later, the door to their compartment opened. Harry pulled his wand out, expecting Draco and his cronies, but was surprised with whom he saw at the door.

“Remus!” He cried, “What are you doing here?”

Remus Lupin smiled, “I’m your new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.”

“Really?” Rose asked. When Remus nodded, she leaped up and enveloped him in a hug. She seldom saw her godfather and was quite fond of him. Then a worried look shadowed her face. She looked up at him and whispered, “But what about your condition?”

“Oh, that,” Remus said, softly, “Don’t worry about it. Professor Dumbledore has that covered. There’ll be someone covering for me during the full moon.”

At this comment, Hermione, Ron and Ginny turned and looked at Harry, a questioning look on their faces. Harry just shrugged his shoulders. Then his eyes met Ginny’s just as the word and image of a werewolf crossed his mind. She gasped but didn’t say a thing.

Ginny looked back at Remus then moved backwards in her seat. Only Harry seemed to notice, a frown forming on his face. *Did she read my mind?*

Remus chatted with them for a few more minutes before excusing himself to return to the teacher’s compartment.

As soon as he left, Hermione turned to Rose and said, “What was that about the full moon?”

Rose sighed and turned to Harry. Harry waved his hand at her, giving her permission to speak. He waved his wand to cast a silencing charm around their compartment, one of the spells his father had taught him this summer.

“All right, you three,” she said, “what I say here doesn’t leave this compartment. Don’t say anything to anyone, not even Fred and George. Not a word, okay?”

The two Weasleys and Hermione nodded their heads.

“Uncle Remus is a werewolf,” she said, sighing at the looks of horror on Ron and Hermione’s faces. She noticed that Ginny didn’t react at all. “It’s not his fault. He was bitten when he was very young, even before he started at Hogwarts.”

“Do your parents know?” Ron asked, shakily.

“Of course,” Rose answered, “He’s one of their best friends. They knew about it when they were studying at Hogwarts. They told us three years ago. We didn’t tell you lot then since we saw no point in it. You’d never meet him during a full moon. He locks himself in a house somewhere on those nights. I guess Professor Dumbledore arranged something to keep him safe during the full moon.”

“Wicked,” Ron said, “imagine being friends with a werewolf while at Hogwarts.”

You don’t know the half of it, Ron. Harry thought. He hadn’t brought up the fact that his father and Sirius were animagi and why they were animagi. Rose hadn’t either. James had told them about it at the same time that he had told them about Remus. Right now, Harry didn’t think it important for his friends to know about that and it seemed so did Rose.

Neville joined them in the compartment an hour later and the six friends spent the rest of the trip chatting and playing around. Harry allowed himself to be trounced by Ron in Wizard chess twice. They also played several rounds of Exploding Snap.

Hermione revealed that she was taking four of the electives – Divination, Care of Magical Creatures, Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. Harry was glad to have her in all three of his classes, but wondered how she could cope with so many subjects.

The train pulled into Hogsmeade Station on time. They managed to fit in a carriage with little difficulty, though the tight fit caused Harry to press closely on Ginny, causing them both to blush. Rose smirked at this but didn't say anything.

They soon arrived at the castle and headed for the Great Hall, taking seats near each other at the Gryffindor table; Harry, Rose and Ginny on one side, Neville, Ron and Hermione across from them. Harry barely listened to the sorting ceremony until he heard a certain name.

"Malfoy, Tiberius Augustus," Professor McGonagall called out.

"What?" Ron said, "Another Malfoy?"

"Looks enough like him to be his brother," Rose said, "I bet he's as arrogant as Draco."

"I don't think so," Ginny said, "Look at him. He looks almost scared. He's smaller and thinner than Draco was at that age." Harry could see she was right.

Ron snorted. Hermione glared at him.

"I agree with Ginny," Hermione said, "He's not as sure of himself as Draco."

Ron snorted again, "One Malfoy is the same as another."

Harry watched as the blonde boy sat apprehensively on the stool and Professor McGonagall placed the sorting hat on his head.

A full minute passed and the students started to get restless. Harry saw that Draco was frowning. Harry remembered that the hat had sorted Draco into Slytherin almost as soon as it had touched the blonde boy's head.

Then the sorting hat shouted out, "Gryffindor!"

The whole Hall was suddenly silent.

Chapter 21: Befriending a Malfoy

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything associated with it except the characters I have created like Rose Potter and Maggie Longbottom.

A/N: Here's the next chapter. Sorry for the wait. Enjoy.

In the silence that followed the sorting of a Malfoy into Gryffindor, you could hear a pin drop. No one moved, most especially the boy on the sorting stool, the boy named Tiberius Augustus Malfoy.

Finally, McGonagall removed the Sorting Hat from the blonde boy's head and pushed him not too gently in the direction of his new House's table. Harry noted that the assistant headmistress' mouth was set tightly into a thin line.

Tiberius walked slowly to the Gryffindor table like someone walking down Death Row. Everyone stared at him. Harry felt a wave of sympathy for the boy, remembering how it felt when the other students had stared at him during his own sorting.

Tiberius finally reached the end of the Gryffindor table, his apprehension and nervousness apparent on his face. The students sitting at that end moved over, leaving a wide space where Tiberius finally sat down in. A good five feet separated him from the other students.

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table. Draco looked furious and was openly glaring at the new Gryffindor, who looked back with fear in his eyes.

Professor McGonagall resumed the sorting, which ended with "Warren, Irma" being sorted into Ravenclaw. Dumbledore then stood up and smiled.

"Welcome to another year at Hogwarts." Dumbledore began, "I'm sure the returning students are looking forward to another year of fun learning and experiencing. For the new first years, I hope you will find learning here fascinating and exciting."

“Now a few announcements, we have two new additions to our staff this year. First, we have a new Defense against the Dark Arts professor, Remus J. Lupin, who I enticed away from the Ministry for the position.” Remus stood up and acknowledged the applause, which was loudest coming from the Gryffindor table. The Weasley twins cheered wildly and whistled.

“Thank you for your enthusiasm and good luck, Professor Lupin,” Dumbledore said, beaming, “Now, Professor Ashton, our old Care of Magical Creatures professor decided to retire after he had that accident with the flesh-eating slugs at the end of the last term. So, I am pleased to say that our own Rubeus Hagrid has agreed to take the position. Good luck to you, professor.”

Wild applause again greeted this announcement, especially from Harry and his friends. Rose and Ginny joined Fred and George in their whistling. Even Percy was applauding. Hagrid grinned as he stood up to acknowledge the applause, shaking the Head table and knocking several glasses on their sides. However, Harry noticed that Malfoy and several other Slytherins didn’t applaud, which he felt did not bode well for his large friend.

“Thank you again,” Dumbledore said, “Now, on to other announcements.” He gave the usual speech about the Forbidden Forest and Filch. Finally, he said, “Tuck in.” Food immediately appeared on the tables and the students started eating.

Harry exchanged a look with Rose. Then the siblings got up and moved towards Tiberius Malfoy who looked uncertain and uneasy.

The blonde boy’s eyes widened as he looked at Harry and probably saw his scar. He moved back in the bench away from Harry. Harry inwardly sighed but put a smile on his face and stuck out his hand. “Hi, welcome to Gryffindor,” he said, “Your name’s Tiberius, right? I’m Harry Potter.”

Tiberius looked at Harry’s hand warily and slowly took it in his own and shook it once. “Yes, Tiberius Augustus Malfoy,” he said, his voice lacking the arrogant tone that was always in Draco’s voice, “I know who you are. Draco’s been ranting about you since you two first met. He hates your guts.”

Harry shook his head as he sat down beside the younger boy, "Well, I guess the feeling is mutual. But, I won't let that affect what I think of you, at least until we get to know each other. You're his brother, then?"

Tiberius sighed, "Yeah, his younger brother."

"You don't seem too fond of that," Rose said, sitting down on the opposite side of the blonde boy.

"Oh," Harry said to Tiberius, smiling, "this is my annoying yet lovable younger sister, Rose Lily. Rose, this is Tiberius Augustus Malfoy." Rose scowled at Harry, then smiled sweetly before shaking hands with Tiberius. Harry noticed that Tiberius had smiled slightly at this.

"Well," he said, looking at Rose, "I'm not fond of being Draco's younger brother. He's always teased me and pushed me around, just because I don't like the things Father talks about, you know, all the pureblood and anti-muggle nonsense." Harry never thought he'd see the day he'd hear a Malfoy call their underlying beliefs 'nonsense'. He could like this boy.

"Well," Rose said, "you don't have to worry about that here. You're a Gryffindor now. Your brother wouldn't dare try something, especially with us around. Come on, let's not let this feast go to waste." She turned around and started piling food on her plate.

Harry saw Tiberius stare at her for a while and then he followed her example and began placing food on his plate. Harry also began to eat.

After a while, Harry looked back to where he had been sitting and at his friends. Hermione looked back at him and nodded. Ron, on the other hand, had a scowl on his face as he stuffed food into his mouth. When Harry looked at Ginny, he could feel pride and understanding coming from her as she smiled at him. Harry smiled back and then went back to eating and talking with Tiberius.

He found out that Tiberius loved Quidditch and was a fairly good player of Wizard Chess. Tiberius was also looking forward to attending Hogwarts, though he had been apprehensive of being in Slytherin.

At the end of the feast, Tiberius said, shyly, "Thanks, Harry. I thought I'd be ignored and picked on in Gryffindor because of my family.

"You're welcome, Tiberius," Harry said, "I'm glad you don't have the same beliefs as your family."

"So am I, Harry," Tiberius said, "You can call me 'Ti'. I think Tiberius is just too formal. I never actually liked it."

Harry smiled, "Sure, Ti. I think that people will like you once they find out you're nothing like your brother. You know, I think Sirius would love to meet you. I'm sure he'd be thrilled to know someone else in his family isn't attracted to the Dark side."

Rose giggled, "You're right, Harry. Uncle Sirius will definitely enjoy meeting Ti."

Ti's eyes widened, "You mean Sirius Black, the Auror? I've heard a bit about him over the years. I know he's my mother's cousin. Do you think I can meet him?"

Harry smiled, "I think that can be arranged. I'll ask Professor Dumbledore about it. You better go and join the other first years, Ti, or you may get lost on the way to our common room."

Ti smiled and joined the other first years as they were led to their common rooms.

Harry saw his friends standing off to one side of the staircase to Gryffindor Tower, waiting for him and Rose. Ron was still scowling. Harry sighed but smiled when he saw Ginny smiling at him.

"Hey, guys," Harry said, "Thanks for waiting up, but I don't think we would have gotten lost."

Fred and George laughed, "That's quite funny, Harry," they said.

The New Marauders headed for Gryffindor Tower.

Just as they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, Ron stopped and turned to face Harry. "Why'd you do that, Harry?" Ron asked, "Why'd you talk to that little git? He's a Malfoy."

"His name is Tiberius, Ron," Rose said, "He may be a Malfoy but he's no Draco."

"Rose is right, Ron," Harry said, "He's nothing like his brother."

"How do you know that, Harry," Ron asked, now glaring at Harry, "from just talking to him one time."

"For one thing," Hermione interrupted, "he's a Gryffindor now."

"That doesn't prove anything," Ron insisted, "He pulled off some trick or something on that Hat, maybe used some Dark Magic."

"Ronald," Hermione said, "you can't trick the Sorting Hat and you can't cast Dark magic here with Professor Dumbledore right there in front."

"Well, he did something, Hermione," Ron said, "there's no way a Malfoy can end up in Gryffindor."

"Why not, Ron?" Harry said, "I almost ended up in Slytherin."

The others except for Rose and Ginny looked at Harry in shock.

"You're just saying that, Harry," Ron said, his voice shaking a bit.

"No, Ron," Harry said, "the Sorting Hat tried to put me in Slytherin, but placed me in Gryffindor because I asked it not to put me in Slytherin."

"I didn't realize you can tell the Sorting Hat where to put you," Hermione said.

"No, Hermione," Rose said, "you can't tell it where to place you but just where you don't want to be."

Hermione and Ron looked at Rose.

"It tried to place you in Slytherin, too, didn't it?" Hermione asked.

Rose nodded, "Yeah, it was about to, but I said no way was I going there. So it placed me in Gryffindor. I guess it thought I was brave for daring to contradict it."

"Maybe that's why it placed Ti in Gryffindor," Harry said, "he may have asked it not to put him with his brother."

"Ti?" Fred asked.

Harry smiled sheepishly, "It's what he wants to be called. He thinks Tiberius is too formal."

Fred and George exchanged glances, "We like this kid. Maybe he'll be willing to join us and prank his brother."

"I'd like to see that, too," Neville said, grinning.

Ron glared at them, "No way! I don't think so. There's no way he's joining us."

"That's not your decision, Ron," Ginny said, "It's Harry's. Remember that we chose him as leader of our merry band."

"Fine," Ron said, "You lot go on and be a friend to a bloody Malfoy. I'm going to bed." He said the password (Proud Leos) to the Fat Lady and practically ran into the common room and up the stairs to the Boy's Dormitory.

Harry sighed and entered the Common Room, which was almost empty of students. He said good night to the others and followed Ron up to their dorm.

Later that night, Ginny was brushing her hair just before going to bed. She was also going through the events of the day. She felt proud of Harry and his willingness to give Ti Malfoy a chance, without any influence of his feelings toward Draco. She had been able to hear bits of Harry's conversation with Ti whenever she looked at Harry and concentrated.

She had been mortified at first when she realized she could feel what Harry was feeling and could read some of his thoughts, especially if

she concentrated hard enough. Lately, she had been more accepting of this strange ability. She found it also strange that it was only Harry that she could read. She felt a bit guilty when she used it against him whenever they sparred against each other in martial arts.

As she was musing over this, Rose came up to her. "Hey, Gin," she whispered, "I think we need to talk."

Ginny raised an eyebrow but Rose raised a hand in warning before Ginny could say anything. Ginny allowed herself to be led to Rose's bed. She waited while Rose drew the curtains shut and cast a silencing charm like the one Harry had cast earlier on the train.

"Now, Gin," Rose began, "back there on the train, when I told the three of you about Uncle Remus being a werewolf, you weren't really shocked or surprised. I'd like to know why."

Ginny's mind desperately searched for an suitable lie while she intelligently said, "Um, well, ah"

"I think you knew he was a werewolf because you read Harry's mind," Rose said.

Ginny's eyes widened. *How did she know that?* "But, how, err, how did you...?"

To Ginny's surprise, Rose giggled. "I guessed that was how you knew. I bet you can feel what he feels, too."

Ginny felt her face heat up as she looked down at the bed sheets.

Rose patted her hand, "Don't worry, Gin. I won't tell anyone for now. So, when did you first find out about this?"

Ginny looked thoughtful for a moment, "Well, looking back, I think I first felt something that morning I woke up in the Hospital wing. I felt happier than I thought I would, you know, after all that happened that night. I was a bit upset with it. Then I realized that it wasn't really my feelings. Then, during the summer, when I was coming over to your place, I'd occasionally get flashes of annoyance or irritation. They'd get stronger if I happened to glance up at Harry's window."

"Hmm," Rose said, "that's interesting. I did notice you glancing at his window once in a while when we were in the back. I thought you were looking for a glimpse of him, but kept myself from asking you."

Ginny blushed, "Well, I did feel sorry for him. I mean, he saves my bloody life and gets grounded for two weeks. I thought it quite unfair."

"Yeah, I thought so, too," Rose said, "but Mum and Dad said they grounded him only because he didn't try hard enough to get an adult to help. Anyway, Gin, what happened when Harry was let loose? Did you get better at feeling him?"

"It was random at first," Ginny said, "I couldn't control it. One minute I felt only my own emotions, then, bang, I'd feel a whole set of different emotions. After a while, I got better at feeling him. If I concentrated hard enough I could even feel him while I was home. Then, when we started with the muggle martial arts, I started getting more than emotions, like random thoughts. After a few days, I could actually tell what he was going to do."

"That's how you were able to intercept the quaffle so well when we played on Harry's birthday," Rose said, "How about when the two of you were partnered during our sparring sessions? Were you also reading his thoughts?"

Ginny nodded, a small smirk on her face, "I'd say I gave him something to think about, didn't I? I don't want him to join my brothers in the 'protect Ginny since she's made of glass' crowd. I don't need another overbearing protective brother."

"Oh, I'm sure you did, Gin," Rose said, smiling.

Ginny wasn't sure why she was smiling but didn't dare ask. "We'd better get some sleep, Rose. We don't want to be late for classes tomorrow. We can talk some more about this some other time."

"All right," Rose nodded, still smiling at Ginny.

Shaking her head, Ginny got off Rose's bed and went to her own, pulling the covers over her and was soon fast asleep.

Much later that night, Harry was slowly moving through the corridors of Hogwarts, headed for the Owlery, hidden under his invisibility cloak. He had written a letter to Sirius about Ti and couldn't wait to get it to his godfather.

As he reached the steps up to the Owlery, Harry heard the sound of movement coming from inside. He carefully climbed the steps, trying to be silent.

When he reached the top, he saw another student tying a letter to a magnificent-looking eagle owl, his back turned to Harry. He noticed the student was male and had platinum blonde hair. Harry stepped into the shadows as the other boy released the large owl, who flew off immediately. The boy turned around and Harry saw his face – Draco.

Draco looked around then headed out the door of the Owlery. Harry watched him go down the steps and disappear. Harry waited for several minutes, making sure the Slytherin boy didn't come back, before he removed his cloak and called Hedwig.

After attaching his letter to Hedwig and instructing her to go to Sirius, he sent her off. Then he threw his cloak back on and headed back to Gryffindor Tower, wondering all the way there as to why Draco had sent a message out in the middle of the night.

The next day, as Harry entered the Great Hall for breakfast, he noticed with sadness that Ti was sitting at the far end of the Gryffindor table, separated from the rest of the first years by several feet.

Harry said hello to Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Rose, who were already sitting down in their usual places. Then, ignoring Ron's scowl, Harry moved down the table and sat beside Ti.

"Hi, Ti," Harry said, "Mind if I sit here? I need the company."

Ti nodded, with a shy smile on his face. Harry sat down on the end of the bench, forcing Ti to move closer to the other first years.

Then, Rose and Ginny sat down on Ti's other side, with Rose next to a brown haired first year boy.

“Hi,” Rose said to the boy, “I’m Rose Potter. You’re Albert Dowley, right?” She’d paid more attention to the sorting than her brother.

The boy’s eyes widened for a while, and then he said in a low voice, “Yes, that’s right.”

“Pleased to meet you, Albert,” Rose said. She stuck out her hand which Albert took gingerly and shook. Then Rose waved one hand at Ginny, “This is Ginny Weasley,” she said. The boy shook hands with her, too.

“Oh, the boy on Ginny’s other side is Tiberius Malfoy. I’m sure you met him last night since he’s a first year like you. I’m sure he won’t mind if you call him ‘Ti’ since you’ll be roommates for the next seven years.” Rose said, smiling at Albert all the while.

Albert looked warily at Ti before nodding and saying, “Hi, Ti. Um, pleased to meet you.”

The other three Gryffindor first year boys had stopped eating as they watched the interaction between Rose, Ti and Albert. Rose asked them their names and then introduced Ti to them, making sure they at least greeted Ti.

Harry then introduced himself. Two of the boys, Albert and Paul Longshore had stunned looks on their faces as their eyes traveled for a second to Harry’s scar. Harry ignored their stares and began talking to them, occasionally drawing Ti into the conversation.

Through the topics Harry used to talk to them, they found out that Albert and Paul were halfbloods, whose fathers worked for the Ministry, which meant that they had heard of the Malfoys. Albert’s father was Deputy Minister for International Games and Sports while Paul’s father was an auror.

The other two boys, Jake Stone and Bradley Martin were muggleborns. However, Albert and Paul had told them a bit about the Malfoys the previous night, which made them nervous being near Ti.

By the end of breakfast, Harry, Rose and Ginny had made the four boys less wary of Ti, by showing him to be a shy and good natured

boy. The three older students were glad when the five boys walked together to their first class, Ti among them.

Harry knew without looking at Ginny that she shared his pleasure at helping Ti with his dorm mates. However, Ron didn't share that sentiment, scowling at Harry and leaving the Great Hall without so much as a hello, Hermione shook her head at the redhead's attitude.

Just as he and Hermione were about to leave the Great Hall, Harry heard a voice calling him. He turned around to see Remus Lupin hurrying towards him. Harry told Hermione to go on ahead, while he talked to the new professor.

When the older man reached him, Harry grinned and said "Good morning, *Professor*. Are you ready for your first day on the job?"

Remus grinned back, "Oh, I think so. The question is, are you ready for what I have in store for you?"

Harry laughed, "Oh, I hope so."

"Harry, I saw what you did, with the younger Malfoy. That was very kind of you, considering the animosity your fathers share."

"I know, Professor. I just felt it was the right thing to do. Mum once told me that you shouldn't judge a child for what his parent does. I decided I would judge him on his own merits."

"That's very good, Harry. Lily would be proud of you."

Harry grinned. "Oh, by the way, I thought that Sirius would want to meet Ti. That's the nickname he wants to be called by. What do you think? I already sent him a letter by owl."

Remus looked thoughtful for a moment, then he smiled. "Hmm. That's a good idea, Harry. Being Narcissa's son, Sirius would be an uncle to Ti. Knowing each other may be good for the two of them. Let me know what Sirius says, okay?"

Harry smiled, "Sure thing, professor."

“You better head for class, Harry. I wouldn’t want to make you late. As to Ti, I think you should go on making friends with him.”

“Of course, professor,” Harry said, “See you.”

Over the next few days, as Professor Lupin advised, Harry, Rose, Ginny, Hermione and Neville would make it a point to greet Ti and the other Gryffindor first years and talk to them for a while. Ron, however, refused to do that.

On Monday afternoon, as the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff third years came into the Entrance Hall on their way in from Herbology, Harry saw the back of a man with long silver hair, dressed in stylish robes and holding a stylish cane – Lucius Malfoy. He seemed headed for the headmaster’s office. Harry had a bad feeling as to the reason why the elder Malfoy was at Hogwarts.

Sure enough, at dinner, McGonagall approached Ti at the Gryffindor table, her lips a thin line on her face.

“Mister Malfoy,” their head of house said, “please follow me to the Headmaster’s office.”

Ti gulped, stood up and followed McGonagall out of the Great Hall. Harry and his friends, except Ron exchanged worried glances. Harry glanced over at the Slytherin table and noted that Draco had a smirk on his face.

Finally, unable to withstand the suspense, Harry got up and headed for the doors. He wasn’t surprised when Hermione, Rose, Ginny and Neville joined him as he reached main staircase.

When they reached the gargoyle guarding the stairs to Dumbledore’s office, Harry suddenly remembered that none of them knew the password. Just then, the stairs started to move.

Harry and the others just had time to stand aside when Lucius Malfoy came striding out, a furious expression on his face. The man glared at Harry and his friends.

"You had something to do with this, Potter," he said, his face reddening, "This isn't over. No son of mine will be a filthy Gryffindor." He stalked off at a furious pace.

Harry and the others watched him leave then turned back to the stairs which had started moving again. This time, McGonagall and Ti were the ones on it. Harry and his friends breathed a sigh of relief.

McGonagall raised an eyebrow when she saw the students at the base of the stairs. "Well, Mr. Malfoy, I think your fellow Gryffindors can help you back to the common room." With that she left them.

Harry turned to Ti and was surprised to see him with tears in his eyes.

"Hey," he said, softly, placing an arm gently on Ti's shoulder, "what's wrong? What happened?"

"Please, I don't want to talk about it," Ti said, "I want to go to bed." He then started walking rapidly.

The others exchanged worried glances again but no one said anything. They hurried to catch up to Ti and the group walked up to Gryffindor Tower in silence. As soon as they entered the Common Room, Ti rushed up the stairs to his dormitory, leaving the others bewildered and confused.

"Wow," Rose said, "what ever happened in Dumbledore's office must have been really bad."

"Maybe we should leave him alone for now," Hermione suggested.

"Maybe," Harry said, "at any rate, I'm going to find out what happened tomorrow from McGonagall or Dumbledore." The others agreed, though Hermione did with reluctance and they went their separate ways to their dormitory.

Harry found Ron already asleep when he got to his bed. He was glad for that as he didn't want to face Ron's anger over being concerned for a Malfoy.

The next day, Harry hurriedly ate his breakfast so he would have time to approach McGonagall or Dumbledore about Ti. He noticed that the younger Malfoy was only picking his food, barely eating anything.

Harry rushed over to the Teacher's table as soon as he had finished. He spotted Dumbledore and McGonagall there. As soon as he was near the table, McGonagall saw him.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" she asked, "What is it?"

"Well, professors," he began, "we're concerned about Ti. He looked terrible last night after coming from Professor Dumbledore's office. Me and my friends assumed his father had a talk with him and the headmaster. Mr. Malfoy looked very angry when he came down from the office. He even thought we had something to do with Ti being in Gryffindor."

"Ti?" Dumbledore asked, "Oh, I see. Interesting nickname he has chosen. It's better and warmer than Tiberius." There was that characteristic twinkle in his eye.

"Sir, what happened in your office that upset Ti?" Harry asked.

"Ah, Harry," Dumbledore, "I'm afraid I can't tell you without Ti's permission. It is his story to tell, though I can tell you that Lucius was not pleased that his younger son was not in Slytherin with his brother." Harry could sense a slight amusement in Dumbledore's voice. "I suggest you give him time to overcome his feelings, Harry. Then, maybe he'll tell you. For now, just be as supportive of him as you and your friends have been the past few days."

Harry's eyebrows rose up a few inches in surprise as to the headmaster's recognition of the efforts of his group in befriending Ti.

"All right, sir," Harry said, "we'll do that."

Later, Harry's mood was improved when Hedwig delivered a letter from Sirius. His godfather was happy to hear about a Malfoy who wasn't arrogant and obsessed with being pureblood. Sirius was willing to meet Ti as soon as he had a break from his duties as an auror. Harry smiled. He hoped this good news would cheer up Ti.

Chapter 22: Strange first lessons and Hermione's birthday surprise

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything associated with it except the characters I have created like Rose Potter and Maggie Longbottom.

A/N: Had to revise the chapter due to a couple of mistakes, one with Hagrid making Ti a second year and the date of Hermione's birthday. Please read it again to see the changes.

Unfortunately, Ti seemed less enthusiastic about meeting Sirius as when Harry had first given him the idea. He did, however, agree to think about it.

Harry was distracted from Ti's situation by his first classes in Divination and Care of Magical Creatures. The Divination teacher, Sibyl Trelawney, seemed to have picked him as the student this year that she would subject to predictions of dying. His consolations were that Hermione was not impressed with her and neither was McGonagall.

He enjoyed Hagrid's lesson on hippogriffs, especially when he got to fly on one. Of course, the whole class was appalled when the hippogriff attacked Draco Malfoy who had approached the animal without bowing properly in respect. Harry's elation that Draco had to spend several days in the hospital wing was ruined by Hagrid's absence at dinnertime and the concern about Lucius' reaction to Draco's injury.

Harry, Rose, Hermione, Ginny and Ron snuck out after dinner to find out what happened to Hagrid. The two younger girls had already learned of the incident from Harry. They knocked on the door of Hagrid's hut. A vaguely familiar voice told them to enter.

When Harry pushed the door open, he and his friends were surprised to see Remus Lupin seated on one end of a huge couch in front of Hagrid who was seated in a huge armchair, looking despondent and holding a huge pewter tankard.

"Ah, hello, kids," Remus said, smiling, "I was wondering when you would show up. It seems our friend here is in need of some cheering."

"Hello, Professors," the five said simultaneously.

"Oh, you don't have to call me that when we're alone," Remus said, smiling, "Come on in."

The five Gryffindors entered the hut and tentatively approached Hagrid. Harry felt his heart clench at the depressed face of Hagrid.

Rose and Ginny then rushed forward and embraced Hagrid tightly.

"Don't you think about it, Hagrid," Rose said, "It wasn't your fault."

"Yeah," Ginny agreed, "That arrogant ass deserved what he got." The other four nodded their heads vigorously, agreeing with Ginny

"Now, don't let him or any of the other Slytherins hear you say that, Ginny," Remus said, chuckling.

"Well, it's true," Harry said, "Draco should have listened to you, Hagrid. We're witnesses to that. We'll tell anyone who asks."

"Gee, thanks you lot," Hagrid said, sniffing, "I 'preciate it." Then he hugged the two redheaded girls.

Hermione eyed the tankard in Hagrid's hand, "Hagrid, maybe you've had enough to drink." She took the tankard and went outside to empty it.

Remus stood up and followed her. "Thanks, Hermione. I've been trying to get him to stop drinking for about an hour now." Hermione beamed at Remus.

Hagrid then got up unsteadily. "Well, I guess she's right," he said. He then headed outside, too. The four students still in the hut heard a loud splash.

When Hermione came back inside, Harry asked her, "What'd he do?"

"He stuck his head in this huge barrel of water," she answered.

Hagrid came back inside with his hair and beard very wet, Remus at his heels.

"Thanks all of yeh for comin' ta see me," he said, "I really am thankful fer yer support."

"Think nothing of it, Hagrid," Remus said, sitting on the couch again.

The five students then sat down as Hagrid sat again in his armchair.

"So, how's Malfoy doing," Ron asked, timidly.

"Oh, Madame Pomfrey fixed him up as well as she could," Hagrid said, "He claims it's still agony, moaning and carryin' on. I 'pect she'll be keepin' him fer a while in the hospital wing."

"Good," Harry said, "that's keep him out of our hair for a while."

"I know someone else who'll be glad not to see Draco for a while," Rose said. Ginny giggled.

Remus smiled, "I believe I know who you're talking about, my dear goddaughter." He turned to Harry, "So, how is Ti doing." They ignored the dark looks Ron was giving them.

"Yeah, Harry," Hagrid said, "How is the younger Malfoy? I haven't had the first years yet, so I'm kinda curious."

"Well," Harry began and they spend about an hour discussing the Gryffindor Malfoy and speculating on what happened in Dumbledore's office the previous night. Not even Remus knew what had occurred there or if he did, he didn't want to tell them yet.

When it was near curfew, Remus made the five students leave under his escort. Hagrid again thanked his five young friends for their support.

As they were walking through the corridors of the castle, Remus spoke up. "That was a good thing you guys did tonight," he told them.

"It was nothing, Remus," Harry said, "he's been our friend for so long, it would have been unthinkable not to show him our support. I hope Malfoy's Dad doesn't try to have him fired."

"I don't think so," Remus said, "especially since Professor Dumbledore pushed for his position quite forcefully with the Minister of Education. I don't think they want to tangle with him again."

"That's good to know," Rose said.

"So, Harry, Ron, Hermione," Remus said, smiling at them, "are you guys looking forward to your first Defense lesson tomorrow?"

Harry grinned, "Oh, yes, Professor, definitely." Hermione and Ron nodded.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll love it," Rose said, beaming up at her godfather.

"Oh, they probably will, Rose," Remus said, "though it won't be the same lesson I gave you second years since they're third years."

They arrived at the Fat Lady's portrait and Remus bid them a good night. The five friends entered the Tower and went to bed.

The next day, Harry was pleasantly surprised to see Ti sitting with the other first year Gryffindors, chatting while eating breakfast. The younger boy seemed less nervous.

The third year Gryffindors had DADA after lunch, excited for their first lesson. Remus greeted them warmly and informed them that it would be a practical lesson. He showed them a large wardrobe cabinet and told them about the boggart inside it.

After a few questions about boggarts, he taught them the ridikulus spell used against boggarts then asked them to line up one by one as they tried to repel the boggart. The class laughed at things their classmates made the boggart do to elicit laughter. Then it was Harry's turn.

Harry raised his wand as Remus opened the cabinet door. The boggart came out looking like his Dad, smiling at him. Harry was confused. Then the James-boggart got hit by a greenish light and collapsed. It stood up, now looking like his mother who also collapsed after getting hit by a greenish light. The boggart went through the same thing as Rose and Ginny, before turning back to James and it

started over again. All this took place in a matter of seconds, but Harry froze, unable to think.

Remus stepped in front of Harry and the boggart changed into a full moon that turned into a balloon after Remus said the ridikulus spell. Harry vaguely heard Remus dismiss the class then turn to him.

“Harry? Are you all right?” Remus asked, moving in front of him and placing a hand gently on his shoulder.

Harry was now breathing rapidly, his heart pounding in his chest. He realized what the greenish light was – the killing curse. Remus had explained to the class that the boggart shows one’s greatest fear. *Is that my greatest fear? Losing my family or having them killed in front of me? Why is Ginny there? Why isn’t Ron?*

Harry felt Remus pull him gently back to the classroom’s desks and make him sit in one of them, kneeling in front of him. Hermione and Ron sat down on either side of him.

“Harry? Come on now,” Remus said, “Snap out of it.”

Harry looked to either side of him, seeing the look of concern on Hermione’s face and the confused look on Ron’s. Then, he looked at Remus and saw only compassion and understanding.

Remus placed his hands on Harry’s shoulder and squeezed gently, “Hey, come on, Harry. Relax, it’s nothing to get panicked about. Seeing one’s family die is a fear all of us have. I’m sure Ron and Hermione have that fear, too.”

Harry looked at his best friends and they nodded slowly.

“It’s true, Harry,” Hermione said, “No one wants to see one of their family die.”

“Yeah, mate,” Ron said, slowly, “I’d hate for anyone in my family to buy it, even Percy.”

“Ron!” Hermione said.

"Well, it's true, Hermione," he said, "Percy can be a real git sometimes, but I don't want him to die anytime soon."

Harry had to smile at his friend's loyalty to his family. He felt the same way, too, even if Rose sometimes got on his nerves.

"See?" Remus said, "There, there's the smile we all like to see. All right, you can rest here a while, then head for your next class." He handed Harry a bit of chocolate. "Eat this, Harry. You'll feel better." Remus walked up to his office.

Harry ate the sweet and did feel less agitated. He glanced at his friends, who smiled; obviously glad he was feeling better.

After a few more minutes, Harry got up and told them that they could go. Outside, they were surprised to find Neville waiting for them.

"You all right, Harry?" Neville asked.

"Yeah, Neville," Harry said, "I was just shocked by what the boggart turned into. I've never thought about my parents or sister dying, especially to the killing curse."

"I know what you mean," Neville said, "When I was younger, I always worried about my parents. Being aurors, they sometimes go off on dangerous missions, hunting for dark wizards."

"Yeah, I guess I felt the same way about my dad," Harry said, "But I don't recall having the same fear about my mother or sister."

Thankfully, none of his three friends mentioned the presence of Ginny among his identified family. Hopefully, they thought it was just a replay of Rose. Unfortunately, Harry happened to glance at Hermione and he thought that she had a knowing smile on her face. Harry steered the conversation away from that subject as they neared the Charms classroom for their next class.

When he sat down to dinner at the Gryffindor table, Harry was surprised to get hugs from Rose and Ginny. Harry dipped his head after Ginny's hug to hide the blush on his face. Rose explained that they heard about what had happened in Remus' class and they

wanted to offer some comfort and support. Harry thanked them and realized that they did make him feel better.

Draco returned to classes that Thursday, with his arm bandaged and in a sling. Oddly, he didn't try to bring any attention to his injury. All he'd do was scowl and glare at his brother during mealtimes. There were rumors that he had received a howler while in the hospital wing but no one, not even Madame Pomfrey would confirm it.

The third Sunday of the month was Hermione's 14th birthday. The New Marauders greeted her before they went on their early morning workout. They promised to give her their presents that evening.

During breakfast, Dumbledore handed her a present from her parents along with a letter. Hermione opened the letter first. The whole Great Hall was startled when she let out a shriek while reading it.

"What's wrong, Hermione," Harry said, as he righted his glass of pumpkin juice that he had dropped in surprise at her yell. Harry grew alarmed at the tears he saw in her eyes.

"Hermione?" Ron asked, "is it your parents?"

Hermione wiped her eyes then smiled, "In a way. My mum said that she's pregnant! I'm not an only child anymore. I'm going to have a sibling! Isn't that great?" She was grinning now.

"Wow! That's great, Hermione," Rose said. Her other friends agreed. Even Dumbledore said it was wonderful.

"So, how far along is your mum?" Ginny asked, "Does she know if it'll be a boy or a girl?"

"Well, she said she's about six weeks pregnant. She won't know what the baby's sex is until another month or two, when the ultrasound can show that."

"Ultrawhat?" Ron asked, confused.

"It's a muggle device, Ron," Hermione explained patiently, "It uses sound to see body organs."

“How do you know that?” Ron asked, “You seem to really know everything.”

“That’s because I read, Ron” Hermione said, “plus, my mum explained it in her letter.”

Harry grinned, amused with their antics. He could see Ginny and Rose placing their hands in their mouths to stifle their laughter.

Hermione was in a happy mood all day. She allowed the New Marauders to just relax around the lake, with no mention of homework.

That evening, the Gryffindors held a party for Hermione. The twins managed to get some food and drinks from the kitchens, along with a large cake. Remus and Hagrid joined them for a while. They were happy for Hermione about her becoming an older sister.

Ti was pulled into the celebrations by Rose and Ginny, who took it upon themselves to act like older sisters to the boy. Hermione even got him to participate in a few party games the two redheads organized, much to Ron’s displeasure. Still, Ron refrained from saying anything that night.

The rest of September passed quickly after that. Ti was now fully accepted by the other Gryffindors, except by Ron. Harry occasionally caught him and Hermione bickering over the younger Malfoy, thankfully when Ti was not around. Harry hoped his male best friend would get over his prejudice.

On the last Saturday of September, Harry received an owl from Sirius. His godfather had arranged to meet Ti on the first Hogsmeade weekend which was on the weekend before Halloween.

The news both excited and dismayed Harry. He was excited for Sirius to meet his nephew but he was dismayed that he may miss going to Hogsmeade for the first time. He had gotten his parents’ permission to go now that he was a third year and had been looking forward to it after hearing all the twins’ stories about the village.

In the end, Harry decided that being there for Ti when he met Sirius was more important than Harry's enjoying a day in Hogsmeade. After all, there would be other Hogsmeade weekends. He couldn't wait to see his godfather again anyway.

Chapter 23: When Sirius met Ti

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything associated with it except the characters I have created like Rose Potter, Maggie Longbottom and Ti Malfoy.

The day of the first Hogsmeade weekend was bright and cool, in spite of the rain the previous night. Harry was excited to see Sirius and both curious and nervous over his meeting Ti. In addition he had Quidditch practice at 3 that afternoon, since their first match would be the following Saturday, the day before Halloween.

Sirius had agreed to apparate to Hogsmeade then walk to Hogwarts for his meeting with Ti in Dumbledore's office an hour before lunch.

Ti looked equally nervous, barely eating anything at breakfast. Harry and Rose kept reassuring him that it would be fine and that he would like Sirius. Hermione and Ginny were eating silently, simply watching the Potter siblings talk to Ti. Ron, on the other hand, was ignoring them and talking to Fred and George about Hogsmeade and the shops there.

After a while, Hermione said, "I'd still like to stay with you three while Ti and Sirius talk, Harry."

"Nah," Harry, "You should see Hogsmeade and its sights, Hermione, especially the bookstore. We'll be fine here. These two are still mad they can't go there yet." He added, waving at the two redhead second years.

Rose's eyes flashed, "I think it's unfair, allowing only third years and above to go to Hogsmeade. We're not little children who can't behave."

Harry smirked, "Oh, come on, sis. I know you'd like to see Sirius again. Maybe he's got a few new judo moves to show us."

Rose pouted for a while then she smiled, "All right, big brother. You caught me. I'd like to see Uncle Sirius again. It's been more than a month."

Ginny giggled. Harry could feel her amusement at her best friend's antics and again felt the gurgling in his stomach that had nothing to do with hunger as he heard her laugh.

For the past few weeks, he'd been spending more time with the two redheads as Hermione and Ron often got into a row over Ron's treatment of Ti. Over that time, Harry's sensing of Ginny's emotions and thoughts had gotten stronger. This proved a little distracting in class, as he occasionally felt her even if he was in another part of the castle. He'd then discovered that he could tune out her thoughts if he concentrated hard enough.

Finally, Fred and George got up from the table. Fred said, "Well, it's time to go."

George added, "Filch should be standing in the courtyard..."

"...to check out everyone's permission form," Fred said.

"So, come on, Ron," George said.

Ron got up and moved to follow the twins. Then he stopped and turned around, "Come on, Hermione."

Hermione looked at Harry who mouthed "go on" at her. Hermione sighed and got up from the table. She whispered, "Good luck" to Ti before following Ron.

Rose and Ginny finally forced Ti to eat more than toast. The four Gryffindors then moved to the Quidditch pitch to while the time away. Ginny had managed to borrow Fred's broom for Ti who had left his broom at home in Malfoy Manor.

They decided to play two-on-two, with Rose and Harry against Ginny and Ti. The three older Gryffindors found Ti a much better player than his older brother. The two pairs were evenly matched. Harry and Ginny seemed to anticipate each other, though Ginny was a better chaser than Harry while Rose's skills compensated for Harry and Ti's slower broom handicapped their side. The score was tied by the time it came to the time they had to meet Sirius.

The four kids then change quickly. Ginny and Rose accompanied Ti to Dumbledore's office while Harry walked to the gates to meet Sirius.

"Sirius!" Harry shouted when he saw his godfather striding up the path from Hogsmeade. He ran up to the older man.

"Harry!" Sirius said, hugging his godson, "How are you? So, Cissy came up with a son who's not his father's son."

"Cissy?" Harry asked, astounded, "That's Narcissa Malfoy's nickname?"

"Only to me and your Aunt Andromeda," Sirius said, grinning, referring to his cousin Andromeda Black-Tonks who was also Narcissa's sister. Harry had met Andromeda and her family four years ago when the Potters had joined Sirius for Christmas. He liked the muggleborn wizard, Ted Tonks, Andromeda's husband and their daughter, Nymphadora, who had graduated from Hogwarts years ago, together with Charlie Weasley. There was a time then that the two were dating, but Harry didn't pay much attention to that.

Harry laughed, "I don't know if Ti will find it funny. Anyway, he seems okay, loves Quidditch, isn't an arrogant ass like Draco and really wants to meet you."

"Well, then, come one," Sirius said, "Let's head for Dumbledore's office."

As they walked, Harry asked, "Speaking of Aunt Andromeda, how's Nymphadora in auror training? Dad doesn't want to talk about it."

"First off, Harry," Sirius said, grinning, "Don't call her Nymphadora, at least within her hearing. I swear, she's one of the clumsiest witches I've ever seen. She's nothing in stealth or tracking. If she wasn't a metamorphmagus, she probably would have been removed from the program last summer. As it is, she's already passed the first year of training. We'll see in a couple of years."

Harry grinned. They talked about the Gryffindor Quidditch team, DADA and the training he and his friends were doing.

When they got to Dumbledore's office, Harry was surprised to find Remus there, standing with Ginny, Rose and Ti. Dumbledore wasn't in the office.

"What?" Remus asked upon seeing the surprised look on Harry's face, "Did you think I'd miss this? I seldom see Sirius these days." He smiled and shook hands with Sirius.

Harry grinned then turned to Ti, "Ti, this is Sirius Black, my godfather and your mother's cousin. Sirius, this is Ti Malfoy, your cousin's second son."

Sirius approached the younger boy, a smile on his face and extended his hand. Ti slowly grasped his hand and shook it, a guarded expression on his face.

"Hello, Ti," Sirius said, "I'm pleased to meet you."

"Hi, Uncle Sirius," Ti said, a nervous tone in his voice, "I'm, um, glad to meet you, too."

"Now, don't call me that, makes me too old," Sirius said, grinning, "Just Sirius is fine."

"Okay, Unc....uh, Sirius," Ti said."

"Why don't we leave these two alone now," Remus said. Looking at Harry, Ginny and Rose.

Ti looked at Remus, "Um, I don't mind if they stay, Professor."

"Sirius, is that okay with you?" Remus asked.

"It's fine with me, Remus," Sirius said, "Ti is used to these three imps by now, so they can stay."

"All right," Remus said, conjuring a long sofa and a couple of armchairs, "Let's all get seated."

Sirius and Remus sat in one of the armchairs each. Rose made Ti sit on the end of the sofa nearest Sirius. She then sat on the other end,

forcing Harry to sit beside Ginny, between her and Ti. She noticed a faint blush appear on both their cheeks.

Once they were all seated, the room was silent for a few seconds. Finally, Remus said, "So, Ti, how are you finding Hogwarts?"

"Um, it's not quite like I thought it would be, Professor," Ti said.

Remus smiled, "You can call me Remus, Ti, when we are alone like this. So, how did you imagine Hogwarts would be?"

"Well, all I knew about it was what Draco told me. He said that Slytherin was the best house for us purebloods and no one got in their way. He called the other houses pathetic and that only scum was sorted into them."

"Why that little git," Sirius said, "he's just like his father." He turned to Ti, "Did you know your father was seventh year when me, Remus and Harry's parents were first years?"

"No, I didn't know that," Ti said.

"Well, he was an arrogant ass already," Sirius said, "At least you didn't take after him, Ti. So, are you enjoying your classes? Made any friends yet in your year?"

Glad for the change in topic away from his father, Ti said, "Well, I like Transfiguration and Charms. Professor Flitwick is funny and I managed to float my feather in the first lesson."

"That's great, Ti," Harry said, "I also did it in the first lesson, as did Hermione. Ron, though, couldn't manage it then."

"How about your other classes, Ti?" Sirius said, "How is Snape treating you?"

"Um, I don't really like Potions. We have it with the Slytherins and Professor Snape likes to take points from Gryffindor, though he hasn't taken any from me yet. In fact, he hasn't paid me any attention."

Harry's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. He exchanged a look with Ginny and Rose.

"That's real strange, Ti," Rose said, "He's not one to ignore a Gryffindor."

"Isn't he your brother's godfather?" Remus asked.

"I think so, uh, Remus," Ti said, "Why?"

"I know what you're thinking, Remus," Sirius said, "I would have thought he'd pick on Ti, considering he's a Malfoy who's in Gryffindor, something like I was back when we were here. Thank Merlin Snivellus wasn't a teacher then."

"What do you mean," Ti asked, a bit bewildered, back then when you were here?"

"Well," Sirius said, "Your mother's probably told you about the Blacks being an old pureblood family, right?" When Ti nodded, Sirius continued, "Well, my family has always been in the Dark Arts and thus always been sorted into Slytherin, including your mum and Aunt Bellatrix," Sirius faced took out a sour expression as he remembered his deatheater cousin, rotting in Azkaban with her husband and brother-in-law. "Then, your Aunt Andromeda was sorted into Ravenclaw. That wasn't so bad. But, then, here I come along and get sorted into Gryffindor. Your granduncle, Malfidus, my late father, was so angry but couldn't do anything about it."

"He didn't try to have you resorted?" Ti asked, his voice a little shaky.

"Resorted?" Remus asked, "That's seldom done, only under the most trying of circumstances, usually when the student has been at Hogwarts for a few years."

Then, Harry realized something, "Wait a minute, Ti, was that why your father was here that day? He wanted a resorting done? Is that why you were up in the Headmaster's office that evening?"

Ti fidgeted in his seat. Finally he looked down at the ground and nodded.

"That arrogant bastard!" Sirius said, "How dare he? He's even more a git than I thought. Well, what did Dumbledore do?"

Ti fidgeted again then said, "Well, the Headmaster asked me if I was happy in Gryffindor. At first, I wanted to say 'no' with the way Father was glaring at me. Then, I thought of the people I've met, the other Gryffindors, like Harry, Rose and Ginny and my dormmates. I mean, after that time at breakfast on the first day of classes, they started talking to me and we really hit it off." He turned to Harry and the two redhaired girls. "I haven't thanked you guys for that." He gave them a shy smile, "Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome, Ti," Harry said.

"Yeah, think nothing of it," Ginny and Rose said.

"So, what happened then?" Sirius asked Ti.

Ti thought for a moment then said, "Well, I told the Headmaster that I was fine in Gryffindor, that I liked it there. Father looked even more furious. He started to shout, saying that a Malfoy in Gryffindor was a disgrace. He, he said he didn't want his son contaminated by muggleloving blood traitors. He demanded that the Headmaster have a resorting of me." Tears were shining in Ti's eyes as he related his story.

"The bastard." Sirius said, "So, what did Dumbledore do then?"

"He told Father that there was no reason for a resorting to be done since I was quite happy in my current house. Then Father shouted that that was not the end of it. He then stormed out of the office."

"Yeah," Harry said, "that must have been when we were standing around at the bottom of the stairs to the Headmaster's office. He came storming down, all red and sputtering. He even threatened me." Almost immediately, Harry regretted saying that.

"WHAT?" Sirius said, "What did that slime ball say, Harry?"

"Well, he just said he thought I had something to do with Ti being in Gryffindor and said that that was not the end of the matter."

“All right,” Sirius said, “I thought he threatened to hex you.” He turned to Ti, “Look, Ti, your situation is the same as mine when I entered Hogwarts. My parents were furious that I was in Gryffindor. When I got home at the end of the school year, they threatened to pull me out of Hogwarts and put me in Durmstrang. I had many rows with them, and threatened to run away if they tried that. That held them off until fifth year when they did try it.”

“What did you do?” Ti asked.

“Well, I carried out my threat. I got some of my stuff and left the house we lived in. Harry’s grandparents and dad were kind enough to put me up in their home. If it wasn’t for them, I don’t know what would have happened to me.”

Remus then looked at his watch, “Hmm, it’s time for lunch. You can sit with the kids at the Gryffindor table, Sirius. Most of the students are at Hogsmeade anyway.”

“Sure, why not? It’ll give me more time to talk with Ti,” Sirius said. He turned to Harry, “What about you, Harry? You still have time to go down to Hogsmeade. I saw Ron and Hermione down there when I apparated in.”

“Nah,” Harry said, “there’ll be other Hogsmeade weekends and I’ve got Quidditch practice later. I’d like to spend some time with you. It’s been almost two months since we saw each other last. Rose is lucky since Remus is here. ”

“Oh, yeah, right,” Rose said, “He’s too busy teaching classes to see me everyday.”

The four kids and two adults then headed for the Great Hall. When they got there, the students already there saw Sirius and started whispering. The noise died down as they approached one end of the Gryffindor table. Sirius sat beside Ti with Harry on his other side. Ginny and Rose sat across from them.

Sirius continued talking to Ti as they ate. “So, you see Ti, I know what you’re probably feeling. But don’t let your family’s reactions affect you. You’re in Gryffindor because of something the Sorting Hat saw in you

that is stronger than ambition or the taint of the Dark Arts in your blood, something nobler and better.”

Ti nodded weakly, attempting to smile. He continued eat slowly.

After a few minutes of silence, Sirius said, “Harry said you like Quidditch a lot. So, how good are you?”

“He’s quite good,” Rose said, “We were playing while waiting for you, Sirius. He’d make a good chaser. He and Ginny made a good team against me and Harry. I know Harry’s a great seeker but he’s not chaser material.”

“Hey!” Harry said, “I’m right here, you know.”

“I know, bro,” Rose said, smiling sweetly, “Still, I think you should stick to being a seeker. You are great at it.”

Sirius smirked, “Oh, don’t mind them, Ti. They get like that sometimes. It’s just part of the way they show their love for each other.”

“Hey!” Harry and Rose said, their cheeks now reddening.

Harry could feel the amusement coming from Ginny.

Sirius then drew Ti into a discussion of Quidditch teams in the National League. Harry was amused and surprised to learn that Ti liked the Chuddley Cannons. Maybe that would help them convince Ron that Ti wasn’t the slimeball Draco was.

After an enjoyable lunch, the younger kids and Sirius accompanied Harry to the pitch to watch the Gryffindor practice. Harry introduced Oliver to his godfather. Once Oliver found out that Sirius had been a beater during his Hogwarts days, he started begging the former Gryffindor for game-winning tips, which Sirius gladly gave.

It was near dinnertime when Sirius finally left. He surprised Ti by hugging him and saying that he hoped to come see him again soon. Harry and the others pretended not to notice when Ti wiped the tears that had formed in his eyes. The three older Gryffindors smiled at this.

They knew that Sirius got a bit lonely sometimes, in spite of his playboy lifestyle.

All in all, it was a good day for Harry. Ti seemed to be warming up to Sirius. Quidditch practice was very good. Even Oliver Wood hadn't been his usual manic obsessive self during practice. Harry looked forward to the game on the next Saturday, wanting to beat Slytherin badly.

Chapter 24: Quidditch and Halloween

Disclaimer: I don't own a thing about this story except the characters I invented like Rose Potter, Maggie Longbottom and Ti Malfoy.

Wood called for another round of practice the next day, right after lunch. *At least we can sleep in since it's a Sunday*, Harry thought. Unfortunately, Fred and George had other ideas.

Someone jumping on his bed roused Harry from an interesting dream where he was chasing a laughing red haired girl around the grounds. He blearily opened one eye to see the blurred image of two tall redheads standing on his bed. He groaned and lay back down.

"Come on, Harry," one of them said, "wake up. We want to do some planning before practice."

"No, lemme sleep." Harry said into his pillow.

"You asked for it," he heard someone say. Then he was suddenly drenched in very, very cold water.

"HEY! What'd you do that for?" Harry said, sitting up, soaking wet.

"Oh, come, come," one twin said.

"Oh, esteemed leader," the other said.

"Don't tell us that," the first twin said.

"You're too lazy to..." the second twin said.

"...plan a prank," the first twin said.

Harry heard several other people laughing and felt someone else's amusement. *Oh, oh.* Harry quickly reached for his glasses and put them on. As the room swung into focus, he noticed that Ron and Neville were hugging each other as they laughed uncontrollably over to his left side. Near the door, hands to their mouths to stifle their laughter, were his sister and Ginny and behind them, was Hermione, glaring fiercely at the twins.

Harry quickly pulled the bedcovers over himself, as he had slept shirtless the night before. He felt a blush creep up his cheeks.

"Hey, you girls shouldn't be in here," he said.

The three girls then smirked. "Hey, bro," Rose said, "there isn't anything there I haven't seen before. Ginny, of course, might be more interested."

Ginny then quickly backed out after shooting a glare at her best friend. Harry could sense her embarrassment.

"Come on, Rose," Hermione said, "let's just wait for them in the common room." She closed the dorm's door once they were through it.

Harry glared at the twins, "You two are gonna get it." He got out of bed and cast a drying charm on his bed. Picking out some jeans and a red short sleeved shirt, he went to the bathroom for a quick shower. He then dressed and descended to the common room.

The others were waiting for him in the empty common room. The twins' back was turned to him. He took out a paper bag and snuck up to the twins. He blew up the bag and popped it right behind them, causing the twins to leap up at least six feet and tumble down in a heap of limbs.

"All right, you two," Harry said to the twins, "that's for getting me wet. Now, about this prank you wanted, I assume it's for Halloween?"

"Yup," Rose answered for the twins who were still picking themselves up, glaring at Harry.

"All right, guys. Let's have some ideas," Harry said, drawing them to sit around the fireplace.

They spent the rest of the morning planning then went to lunch. After lunch, he and the twins went off to practice, where Wood was his usual manic self.

When Harry woke up Monday morning, he heard the rain falling against his window. He hoped the weather would clear soon. Unfortunately, it didn't. In fact, it got worse and worse so that by Wednesday, the wind was howling like a banshee.

It got even worse at lunch when Oliver approached them.

"I've just been told that we'll be playing Hufflepuff on Saturday, instead of Slytherin," Oliver said angrily, "Flint claims his seeker is still injured."

"What!" Harry said, "That's a load of crap! Malfoy's arm is fine now. He doesn't even have it in a sling anymore."

"I know, Harry, I know," Oliver said. He looked out towards the window. "I bet they just don't want to play in this bloody kind of weather."

The rain and wind continued so that on Saturday, it was difficult to stay on a broom, yet the match wasn't called off. As Harry circled high above the pitch Saturday morning, he shivered in his thoroughly wet Quidditch robes, holding tightly to his broomstick.

Lightning flashed through the sky every few minutes. It was a good thing Hermione had cast a charm on his glasses to keep it dry or he wouldn't have been able to see a thing.

Harry hovered for a few seconds to watch Angelina and Katie make a spectacular goal. He could barely hear the commentary from Lee Jordan over the howling wind.

He glanced up to see the Hufflepuff seeker, Cedric Diggory, watching him. He was a sixth year, much larger than Harry was which made him slower but his size gave him a greater reach. Harry hoped his broomstick would give him an edge.

Harry heard a scream and turned back to the game. He saw someone in red robes hurtling towards him, their broom's rear on fire. From the screams, he recognized Alicia Spinnet's voice. She turned away from him and plummeted straight down, out of control.

Harry hesitated for a second then plunged after her. His Nimbus' speed allowed him to catch up with her. He pulled alongside her and reached out, grabbing the handle of Alicia's broom. He steered it to the ground to the Gryffindor side of the pitch, allowing Alicia to land safely.

"Thanks, Harry," Alicia said, breathless and still shaking a bit. By now, the rain had extinguished the flames coming from the broom. She looked up. "Go on, Harry. I'm fine now. Get back up there before...oh, too late."

"POTTER!" a voice bellowed from above, "GET BACK UP HERE!"

Harry groaned. He knew it was Oliver Wood who was shouting as he looked up. Their team captain was hovering in front of the goal posts, his face red. Harry groaned again and guided his broom back up to the sky.

Once he had gotten high up, he looked around. Then, he saw Diggory streaking upward about twenty feet from him. Harry moved after him and saw that the Hufflepuff seeker was indeed chasing the snitch.

Harry pushed his broomstick forward, willing it to go faster. He drew closer to Diggory. He felt a sinking feeling as he saw the older boy closing in on the snitch. Harry threw himself flat on the broom. As he got closer to Diggory, he watched with bated breath as the yellowclad seeker's outstretched right hand neared the snitch.

Then, just as Diggory's hand came within a couple of inches of the snitch, a bolt of electricity flashed between the snitch and Diggory, causing his hair to stand on end. The Hufflepuff somersaulted backwards, away from the snitch and downwards. Harry caught a glimpse of the stunned look on the older boy's face as he passed him. Harry didn't hesitate but sped after the snitch.

Harry moved after it, weaving among the clouds. He was now so high, he couldn't see the pitch below. Then, the snitch suddenly dove and Harry dipped his broom to follow it. Soon, he was vertical, heading straight toward the ground, gaining speed as he struggled to control the broom against the ever increasing wind.

The snitch swerved below him, forcing Harry to an even steeper angle, almost upside down. Closer and closer he came to the snitch, one foot, then eleven inches, eight inches, five inches, two inches, half an inch. Then his hand was closing around the golden winged ball just as he was about to touch the ground. He rolled upright and zoomed a little higher. He lifted his hand to show the struggling golden ball as the crowd roared their approval.

Then Harry saw several red and yellow blurs hurtle toward him and they jumped on him, knocking him off his broom. They all fell the last few feet to the ground, laughing and cheering. As they got up, muddy and dripping wet, the team became awash with their supporters.

Harry was hugged immediately by two female redheads. Ron and Hermione looked on with a look of disgust and amusement, respectively. Harry could see his parents in the back of the crowd, waving, his father grinning from ear to ear.

Fred and George shouted, "Party in the Common room tonight!" above the noise of the crowd. The crowd then started to disperse, leaving the team and their closest friends.

"That was a great move, son," James said, grinning, as he. Lily and Remus approached the team.

"Thanks, Dad," Harry said, grinning back. He stepped back when Lily tried to hug him. "Mum! Please, I'm all muddy," he said, "and not in front of the team," the last part in a low tone. Lily laughed and ruffled Harry's hair, even if he was already as tall as she was.

The team hurried into the changing room to shower and change to clean clothes. When they exited the changing rooms, only the Weasley siblings, Hermione, Lee Jordan, Harry's parents and sister and Remus were left waiting. They all headed back to the castle.

As they reached the front steps of the castle, Harry saw Ti waiting shyly in the shadow of the doors. "Hey, Ti," he called to the younger boy, "Come on over here." Ti slowly made his way down to him. Harry ignored the scowl on Ron's face as the younger Malfoy neared them.

Harry took Ti by the arm and led him to his parents. "Dad, Mum, I'd like to Ti, Ti Malfoy. Ti, meet my Mum and Dad."

Ti looked nervously at the Potter parents. Then, James smiled and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Ti," James said, "Sirius and Harry have told me quite a bit about you. I have to admit that I was a bit surprised and suspicious about a Malfoy getting sorted into Gryffindor. I'm sure you know that your father and I have a bit of history since Voldemort's fall." James and Harry noticed Ti flinch at the mention of Voldemort's name. "But," James continued, "if my children and best mates think you're all right, then I guess I can also." James smiled again.

Lily smiled at Ti, "That's right, Ti. We trust our children's judgement and choice of their friends and Sirius is a difficult man to convince. So, we're glad to finally meet you."

"Gee, thanks, Mr. Potter, Mrs. Potter," Ti said, smiling shyly, "Though I think my father won't be pleased about me meeting you." Ti grinned after saying that.

James laughed, "No, I don't think he will."

Harry's parents talked to Ti a bit about his experiences in Hogwarts and Quidditch for several minutes. Then, James and Lily bid goodbye to the kids and left after congratulating Harry again for winning the game. Remus also took his leave of the kids, who hurried off to the Great Hall for lunch.

After lunch, Harry managed to get the other New Marauders together in an empty classroom and they finalized their plans for their prank for the next day. Rose kept an eye on the Marauder's map during their meeting to make sure they weren't found by any other students or the teachers. They finished in time for dinner.

After dinner, the Gryffindors trooped back to their Tower. The Common room was decorated with red and gold banners and there was a lot of food. The twins seemed to have managed to get some butterbeer in. Music, both wizarding and muggle blared into the air. Harry was gladdened by the sight of Ti happily interacting with his

other housemates, who showed no animosity. The party itself lasted until midnight when McGonagall came in dressed in a tartan dressing robe demanding they get to bed.

As it was a Sunday, Halloween started with a better breakfast than usual, if there was such a thing in Hogwarts. In fact, both breakfast and lunch were spectacular, leaving the students groaning from their full stomachs and anticipating the feast in the evening.

Harry and his friends didn't go on their usual morning run. After breakfast, they rested for a couple of hours then found an empty classroom to practice some martial arts.

Harry still felt uncomfortable sparring with Ginny and paired off with Neville. He did notice her glancing at him from time to time. Whenever their eyes met, he felt heat creep up his cheeks and thought he saw her flush as well.

Their martial arts prowess was increasing as a whole. But, Harry found he had the fastest reflexes in the group, followed by Ginny, Rose, Neville, Ron and Hermione. Naturally, the boys had more power in their strikes but the girls were more flexible and had a greater range of moves available to them.

After lunch, they went out to the grounds, to play around and enjoy the day, which was sunny. A lot of the other students were there as well to enjoy the outdoors, since more rain was expected as winter drew closer.

As the sun started to set, Harry and his friends slipped away from the grounds, one by one. Few noticed them leave.

When it came time for the Feast, the whole school entered the Great Hall together. They gazed with awe and amusement at the different decorations in the Hall. Pumpkins larger than most of the students were in the middle of the tables, scary faces carved into them. Bats flew around the Hall. Real spider webs were strung along the ceiling from rafter to rafter. Platters and goblets made of gold and silver instead of the usual brass and tin were on the tables also, empty for the present.

After the students had all taken their seats at their tables, Dumbledore stood up and said his usual Halloween speech. Then came the words the students, especially Ron, had been waiting for, "Tuck in."

Food immediately appeared on the tables in the previously empty serving platters. The pitchers filled with pumpkin juice and water. The students started helping themselves to the tremendous amount of food, including the different sweets and chocolates.

Harry ate slowly, anticipation for what the New Marauders had planned building in him. His head was bent down but he was eyeing the Slytherin table through his bangs. He knew the others were excited to see what would happen, if the feelings he was getting from Ginny were a sample.

About an hour into the Feast, a cloud of smoke suddenly appeared covering the Slytherin table. When the smoke cleared, all the Slytherins from third year up were in the colors of the rainbow. Every part of their body was a different color as in their heads were purple, one arm was red, the other arm was green and so on.

The hall was filled with laughter as the other houses gawked at the sight. The younger Slytherins were just staring at their older housemates and glancing uncertainly around at the other houses. Harry and his friends joined in the laughter, grinning at each other.

Harry glanced at the Head Table, noting that the teachers reacted just like they had on previous pranks. Dumbledore gazed on the sight calmly with his characteristic eye twinkle, McGonagall looked sternly on though a upward turn of one corner of her mouth betrayed her amusement, Flitwick, and Hagrid were laughing, Sprout and Vector were smiling and Snape was openly glaring at the Gryffindor table, most especially at Harry.

Finally, unable to stand it, the affected Slytherins got up from their table and fled the Hall. Snape went up to the Slytherin table and told the rest of his House to follow their jinxed housemates. He then followed them after glaring one final time at the Gryffindors. The laughter soon died down and the Feast resumed.

Harry and his fellow marauders grinned. They didn't care to advertise their involvement this time, figuring that the rest of the school would know who was responsible. They had not included the first and second year Slytherins since they didn't want to traumatize them, as they weren't as bad as their older housemates. Their prank was a great way to end a great weekend.

Chapter 25: A couple of Sirius visits

Disclaimer: I don't own a thing about this story except the characters I invented like Rose Potter, Maggie Longbottom and Ti Malfoy.

After Halloween, November seemed to fly by quickly as it got colder and colder. The third weekend of November was another Hogsmeade weekend and this time, Harry went with Ron, Hermione and Neville.

Rose and Ginny pouted all through breakfast, complaining about the unfairness of it, well, mostly it was Rose. Ginny barely spoke but Harry could sense the feelings of sadness and disappointment coming from her. He tried to dampen his own feelings of excitement and anticipation so as she wouldn't feel more down.

The three took Harry all around the village. Harry found it all interesting and stared at all the different buildings and businesses. He decided to buy a lot of chocolate and candy at Honeyduke's for his sister and her cute best friend. *Hey, where did that thought come from?* Harry thought he heard some giggling in the back of his mind, along with a little heat.

Harry gawked at all the different joke items in Zonko's and bought quite a few, thinking of sharing it with Rose and Ginny as well. Then, the Gryffindor foursome headed into the Three Broomsticks and Harry had his first butterbeer, which he loved the second it touched his lips,

The four Gryffindors had lunch there and continued their wandering around the village. They soon ended up outside the Shrieking Shack and while the others talked about its reputation as the most haunted place in Britain, Harry looked at it with mixed feelings. He and Rose knew its true purpose as a safe place for their Uncle Remus to transform to a werewolf during his Hogwarts days and even now.

Remus had secretly told him and Rose at the beginning of the month that he was again using the Shack to stay in during the full moon. In fact, the four Gryffindors had overheard some of the patrons at the Three Broomsticks discussing the renewal of the strange sounds from the place after a lull of over a dozen years. Thankfully, it was a few more days to the full moon.

Harry was thankful when Ron suggested that they head back to the castle. He and Rose found Remus' condition painful and didn't like any reminder that he was a werewolf.

He remembered the DADA class after Halloween. It was right after a full moon and Remus was too tired to teach. Unfortunately, Dumbledore chose Snape to substitute for Remus. The greasy haired professor had made them study werewolves during that lesson, in spite of being informed by Hermione that they wouldn't touch the subject until the next term. Snape had even assigned them two rolls of parchment on werewolves as homework. Fortunately, Remus showed up for the next lesson and told them that they didn't have to do that assignment.

When the four Gryffindor third years got to the Entrance Hall, they were surprised to see Sirius there talking to Ti, Rose and Ginny. Harry hurried over to them, ignoring the scowl that was on Ron's face.

"Sirius!" he called, "What are you doing here?"

Sirius grinned as Harry stopped in front of him, "Surprised? I asked Dumbledore to visit and told him not to tell any of you. I wanted to see you all. After all, I have a new nephew to get to know better and I can't miss a chance to visit with my godson and his sister, not to mention my other favorite redheads, Neville and Hermione, too."

He greeted the others and suggested that they all move to the lake shore. Ron excused himself, bringing a frown to the others' faces and a sad look on Ti's. Hermione looked furious but stayed with them.

"Sorry I missed the game, Harry," Sirius said, as they walked down the path to Black Lake, "I was on duty that day, couldn't get anyone to trade shifts with me."

Harry smiled, "That's okay, Sirius, there'll be other games."

When they arrived at the lake, Sirius asked them about their martial arts training. Ti listened with interest. Harry decided to include the first year in their workouts no matter what Ron said. Sirius and the others agreed when Harry told them, even more when Ti's face lit up with the prospect of joining them.

Sirius stayed for dinner, learning more about Ti and his home life. He wasn't pleased to learn that Draco often picked on him even when Lucius was present. He was quite surprised to learn that Narcissa was more lenient with Ti though she dared not disobey Lucius.

Harry was pleased when Ti and Sirius again embraced before the latter left. With this development, Harry was starting to think of Ti as a younger brother, as he had occasionally been envious of the larger Weasley family, not that he didn't love his own, but the thought of having many siblings to care for had always been a dream of his. Now, with Ti and the new baby coming, it seemed to Harry like that dream was coming true.

The next day, Ti joined the six other Gryffindors in the secluded area of the lake shore where they usually did their workout. Ron didn't look happy but stayed and kept his mouth shut. Harry felt a twinge of satisfaction that wasn't his own. He turned to look at Ginny and noted the smirk on her face. Harry guessed she had had a "talk" with her brother about Ti.

Harry grinned and decided he really liked this girl, even if she was his best friend's sister and his sister's best friend.. At that thought, he noted a blush creep up Ginny's face. He found that interesting.

Harry and Rose helped Ti learn the basic martial arts moves and soon had him doing exercises with them. By the time the first snows came, in the first week of December, he was joining their sparring sessions. Harry made sure not to pair him with Ron, as he knew he and Hermione still rowed over Ti's acceptance into their group. As of now, they hadn't let him into the New Marauders yet, even when the twins had voiced their support of that idea.

The New Marauders had played a few more pranks on the school populace during the week, including themselves in several to deflect suspicion away from them. They sent fake letters through the school owls at random people which blew up and sprayed red ink over the person that spread further if someone cast a cleaning charm on the affected person. Harry, Rose and Neville allowed themselves to be included in that prank, much to the amusement of their co-pranksters.

Another prank involved spiking the pumpkin juice with a mild truth potion, brewed by Harry and Neville using a recipe Harry had found in a book at Potter Manor. The potion prevented anyone affected from lying for 24 hours. Needless to say, it caused some interesting situations, like when a seventh year Slytherin boy was caught by his Slytherin girlfriend snogging another girl and admitted he liked the other girl (a Hufflepuff) better and when one of Gryffindor fourth year girls got a new though hideous set of clothes and asked her roommates for their opinion.

The success of Ti's lessons in martial arts became evident on the first Sunday night of December. Harry and his friends were all seated around one table in the nearly deserted Common room an hour before curfew, doing their homework when the Portrait Hole opened.

Harry was bent over writing an essay for Charms when he heard a gasp come from Rose and Ginny, who across from him, facing the Portrait Hole. At the same time, he felt a wave of alarm and panic pass through him, coming from Ginny. He turned around and was surprised to see Ti and Neville standing there in torn and bloodied robes and wide grins on their faces.

"Ti, Neville, what the bloody hell happened to you?" Harry asked. Luckily for him, Hermione was too far to smack him for his language though she did humph at him.

Ti grinned and said, "Draco and his goons cornered us coming back from the library."

"If that's how you two react to being cornered by Draco," Rose said, "I'd hate to see what gets you down. Come on over to the fireplace." She grabbed their arms and pulled them to sit down in one of the couches in front of the fireplace, sitting herself beside Ti. Harry sat on Neville's other side while Ginny, Hermione and Ron sat in the other couches.

"So, tell us what happened?" Rose asked.

"Well," Ti said, "Neville was helping me with my Herbology essay and we were the last ones to leave the library. On the fourth floor, Draco and Crabbe step out in front of us from inside a classroom then Goyle

and Nott moved behind us. They surrounded us and backed us into the wall. Good old Draco started saying he wanted to teach a lesson to two blood traitors. He taunted me for staying in Gryffindor even when Father wanted me to be resorted. Then, he tried to punch me like he used to do." Ti turned to Harry, a grin on his face, "I ducked like you taught me then grabbed his extended arm and threw him into the wall."

"Yeah," Neville said, "It was a great move. The others were shocked and we kicked their butts. They barely laid a hand on us. The blood on us is from them."

"Yeah, guys," Ti said, "Those marital arts you taught us really saved us."

"It's **Martial** arts, Ti," Rose said, smirking, "We're glad they helped you two."

They all laughed as Ti launched into an actual demonstration of the fight, with some comments from Neville.

While they were recovering their breaths from laughing so hard, Ron looked at Harry then turned to Ti. "Uh, Ti," Ron said, uncertainly, "I, um, think that it was brilliant how you taught Draco and his gang a lesson."

"Gee, thanks, uh, Ron," Ti said shyly.

Then Ron turned to look at Hermione who looked sternly at him and motioned toward Ti with her head. None of the others missed this exchange.

Ron sighed and turned back to Ti. "Look, Ti," Ron said, "I want to say I'm sorry for the way I've treated you since you got here. I just couldn't help but compare you to your brother. Then I was shocked at how easily Harry and the others accepted you. Hermione's been talking to me about my attitude."

"Just talking, Ron?" Ginny asked, with a little irritation in her voice, "That seemed more than just talking about it."

“Yeah, if that was ‘just talking’,” Rose added, “I’d hate to see what an real row between the two of you is like.”

Ron turned a bit red but didn’t answer the two female redheads. “Anyway, Ti,” Ron said, “I’m sorry for treating you badly. I hope we can be friends.” He stuck out his hand.

Ti looked at his hand nervously for a couple of seconds, then extended his own hand slowly to shake Ron’s hand. “Sure, Ron, I’d like that,” Ti said, giving a shy smile to the taller boy.

“Great!” Rose said, “Now, he can be part of the New Marauders.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ron said, “We can take him in.”

“New marauders?” Ti asked, “That group that’s been playing pranks? Wait, don’t tell me. Some of you are in this group, right? Oh, I heard about them from Draco, from the bad side, of course. How I’d love to prank his sorry behind.”

Harry smiled, “Actually, Ti, all of us here are part of the New Marauders. Just add Fred and George Weasley and you have the whole bunch.”

Ti’s eyes widened, “Really? Wow, that’s great.” He looked at Harry, “I’d love to join you. But, first, I’d like to know why that name.”

Harry grinned. He cast a few privacy and silence charms around them and proceeded to tell Ti about the old Marauders. At the end of Harry’s tale, Ti was smiling broadly at the prospect of being a Marauder like his Uncle Sirius.

They went to bed after that, promising to Ti to meet together to plan a prank for the last weekend of the term.

The following weekend was another Hogsmeade weekend, the last before Christmas and Sirius had come after lunch again to visit Ti. They played in the snow with Rose and Ginny. Harry, Ron and Hermione joined them after spending the day in Hogsmeade.

They told Sirius about having Ti join the New Marauders. Sirius was ecstatic to finally have someone related to him as part of the new band of Hogwarts pranksters.

As the group walked up the front stairs with Sirius, heading for the Great Hall for dinner, someone called out, "Tiberius!" Ti turned around and gasped, his face turning almost as pale as his hair, "Father?"

Sirius and the others turned around to find Lucius Malfoy coming up the steps towards them. He wasn't alone. With him were Fudge, looking a bit nervous and two aurors.

The older Gryffindors looked at each other, worry evident on their faces. Why was Lucius back at Hogwarts?

"Why the hell are you here, Malfoy?" Sirius said, evidently ignoring the Minister and his fellow aurors.

Lucius looked with distaste at Harry and his friends and at Sirius with loathing. "We are here to see the Headmaster, Black. You don't need to know the reason."

"If it has something to do with Ti," Sirius said, "then I'm making it my business."

"You have no rights in that, Black," Lucius said, "I am his father and it is my right to do what I must to make sure he follows the family tradition."

"I know all about your family tradition, Malfoy," Sirius said, angrily, "It's the same stinking tradition as my family, the so-called Noble House of Black."

Lucius sneered, "Oh, how the mighty have fallen. Your family used to be highly regarded and respected among all purebloods. You've ruined it, Black. You're a blood traitor just like Potter's father."

Harry and Rose gasped. Harry started to reach for his wand. Sirius was turning red and glaring at Lucius.

Just then, they heard a voice say, "Ah, Minister, Lucius, you are here."

They all turned around to see Dumbledore standing there at the top of the stairs.

Sirius walked up to Dumbledore. "Albus, is he here to force a resorting like he tried to do back in September?" he asked in with a hard tone.

"I'm afraid so, Sirius," Dumbledore said. Ti had turned even paler when he heard Sirius' question. Harry and the others looked uncertainly at each other, unable to think of what to say to comfort their friend. Lucius simply looked smug and had an arrogant smile on his face.

Dumbledore turned to Fudge, "Minister, Lucius, I think we should discuss this in my office. Harry, I think you and your friends should accompany Ti back to Gryffindor Tower in the meantime."

"I'm coming with you to your office, Albus," Sirius said, "Someone has to represent Ti's better interests."

Lucius opened his mouth to protest but Dumbledore said, "Of course, Sirius." He turned to Fudge, "Minister, shall we?"

Fudge looked at Lucius then turned to Dumbledore and nodded. The adults entered the Entrance Hall and headed for Dumbledore's office.

As the adults left, Harry turned to Ti who looked again like that scared boy at the beginning of term. "Um, Ti," he said, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder, "come on, it'll be all right. Let's go to Gryffindor Tower like the Headmaster said."

Ti reluctantly allowed Harry to steer him up the stairs back to Gryffindor Tower. When they reached the Common room, Ti broke into a run and headed up the stairs to his dorm.

Harry and the others exchanged looks of concern and worry. No one could think of anything to say. They sat down in silence at their usual

seats in front of the fireplace. Harry felt a rage similar to his own coming from Ginny. He wondered if she could feel his feelings, too.

After about half an hour, a knock was heard from the portrait hole. Harry opened it and found Sirius standing there, a scowl on his face. He let him into the Tower and the others crowded around the black-haired man.

"What happened, Sirius?" Harry asked his godfather.

"Lucius Malfoy happened, Harry," Sirius spat out, "That bloody bastard got Fudge to issue a special education decree in favor of him ordering Dumbledore to have a resorting of Ti." He looked around the common room, "Where is he, anyway?"

Harry sighed, "He went up to his room, ran up to it actually. I don't blame him."

"Can't Professor Dumbledore fight the decree?" Rose asked.

"I don't know, Rose," Sirius said, "Albus had an option to present the case against it in front of the Wizengamoot but that will take a while. I'm not sure what will happen to Ti in that event. He decided to allow the resorting" He turned towards the stairs. "We better get Ti down here. Albus did insist that the resorting take place in front of the school so its results would be uncontested. We need to get him to the Great Hall."

Rose and Ginny looked at each other. "We'll get him," Rose said.

Ron sputtered, "You can't go into a boy's dorm."

"Oh, you're wrong, dear brother," Ginny said, "You boys cannot go up the stairs to our dorms but we girls can go to yours anytime." The two redhead girls strode up the stairs to the boys' dormitories without any problem.

Ron looked shocked and didn't speak.

After a couple of minutes, Rose and Ginny came back down arm in arm with a visibly distressed Ti. His face looked like he had been

crying. Harry felt bad for him and hoped Dumbledore knew what he was doing. If Ti got sorted into Slytherin, it could crush him.

The group slowly made their way to the Great Hall. When they entered, they saw that the entire student body was there, along with most of the faculty. McGonagall stood beside the sorting stool with the Hat in her hand and a stern frown on her face. Lucius Malfoy and Fudge were seated at the faculty table.

McGonagall strode up to the group and said, "Please take your usual seats for now. The headmaster will explain the situation to the students and then will call Ti.."

Harry looked at Dumbledore and noted him smiling slightly with a twinkle in his eye. He turned to Ti, "Don't worry, Ti. It'll be all right. Trust Dumbledore, He knows what he's doing." Harry didn't let his friend hear the *'I hope'* that he came into his thoughts at that last statement.

I hope so, too he plainly heard inside his head in a female voice. Eyes widening, he turned towards Ginny and saw she had a slight smirk on her face.

The six Gryffindors sat at their table. Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and saw Draco with an evil smile on his face, causing Harry to clench his fists in anger. Ti simply looked down at his feet. Then Dumbledore stood up.

"My dear students, I know you are all curious as to why we have delayed our dinner tonight and why the esteemed gentlemen to my left are here. Well, to dispel the rumors, I will tell you. Tonight, you will witness something that is seldom done, a resorting." Dumbledore paused as the students reacted to the news. When they settled down after a few seconds, he continued.

"Such a thing is not done lightly as it can cast doubt on how we assign students to their houses. However, the Ministry has decided to intervene in the case of this student as requested by his father."

The whole Hall broke into a flurry of whispers as the students speculated on the identity of the unlucky student. Harry and his friends didn't take part as they already knew who it was.

Then, Dumbledore's voice sounded over the noise, "Mr. Tiberius Malfoy, please come up here."

The whispering became louder as the students watched Ti slowly get up and walk toward the stool, his feet shuffling along the ground. He sat on the stool and McGonagall placed the Sorting Hat on his head. The whole school held its collective breath as they waited for the Hat to speak.

Chapter 26: Where does Ti go?

Disclaimer: I don't know anything you recognize, but Rose, Ti and Maggie are mine.

A/N: I'm back and on the road to recovery. Thanks for all the reviews. Now, on with the show, er, book.

Ti walked nervously to the Sorting Stool. He wondered how his father had managed to make Dumbledore have a resorting. He had thought his father had given up after that day in September, especially when he had not done anything after Draco was injured by that hippogriff.

As he sat down on the Stool, Ti wondered where the Hat would place him. He didn't think he belonged in Gryffindor anymore as he had run off to his dorm crying as soon as he had gotten back to Gryffindor Tower. He blinked back the tears as he thought of the friends he had made in Gryffindor, knowing he would miss them, especially Rose and Ginny.

When Professor McGonagall placed the Hat on his head, he again heard the voice in his ear that he had talked to last September first.

"Ah, young Tiberius Malfoy, we meet again," the voice in his ear said, "It seems some people aren't happy where I placed you. Why do they not listen to me?"

"Er, I don't know, sir," Ti replied, "It's my father. He doesn't like me being in Gryffindor. He wants me in Slytherin, like he was and my brother is now."

"My, you are a polite one," it replied, "just like three months ago. No one had ever called me sir until you did. And like I said three months ago, young Tiberius, you are nothing like your father or brother. You have some cunning, but not the ambition to succeed at any cost that they have. You have a good mind though not enough for Ravenclaw. You are loyal to those you consider your friends but not to your family. However, your greatest trait is your courage."

"Courage?" Ti said, "How can I have courage when I ran crying to my dorm less than an hour ago."

“Ah, it is to be truly courageous when you face something or someone even when you just want to give up or run away. You are sitting here in spite of the chance you may not be with your friends again, even if some of them had to drag you here. You fought back against your brother and his companions even when they were greater in number. That is why you must stay in.....GRYFFINDOR?”

Ti sighed in relief as his housemates broke into a loud cheer that soon spread to the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. The Slytherins were shocked into silence.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Harry and his friends let out their breaths and broke out in cheers with the rest of their house as they heard the Sorting Hat's pronouncement.

Ti jumped off the Stool and ran back to the Gryffindor table. As he got there, Rose and Ginny leaped from their seats to hug him fiercely. Ti sat happily beside Harry, a huge grin on his face. Harry matched it with one of his own.

“See, Ti?” Harry said, “You had nothing to worry about. Dumbledore knew what he was doing when he let this occur. Now your father can't do anything anymore about you being in Gryffindor. It's where you belong.”

They looked together back at the Head Table. Dumbledore smiled at them with a twinkle in his eye. Sirius, Remus and Hagrid had grins wider than the Cheshire cat. McGonagall looked stern except for a slight upturn of the corner of her mouth. Snape just looked bored and unconcerned. The other professors simply looked amused and relieved.

Lucius Malfoy, on the other hand, looked furious. He got up from the table and stormed out of the Great Hall, Minister Fudge running after him with a confused and frightened look on his face. The aurors followed him, looking somber.

Dumbledore then stood up, "Well, after that excitement, I believe we could use a good meal." He clapped his hands and the tables were filled with the usual overflow of food and drink. "Go ahead, tuck in."

Harry and his friends enjoyed the food, as usual. Ti seemed to have regained his appetite. Just as they were eating dessert, Sirius came up and squeezed in beside Ti.

"So," Sirius said, a sheepish grin on his face, "I guess there wasn't anything to worry about, after all."

Harry grinned, "Well, all of us felt the same." He turned to Ti, "I hope your father gives up after this."

At this, Ti suddenly deflated and looked apprehensive.

"What is it?" Harry asked, "What's wrong now?"

"I just realized that I have to go home for Christmas," Ti said, "What will happen when I do?"

Harry and Sirius looked at each other. The others also suddenly realized what Ti meant.

Rose said, "You don't have to go home, Ti. Students are allowed to stay here during the Christmas holidays."

"Yeah, that's right," Harry said, "You can just ask Professor Dumbledore. I'm sure he'll understand."

"I hope so, Harry," Hermione said, "Usually a student needs his or her parents' permission to stay here."

"Well," Sirius said, "there's no harm in asking, I think."

"Yeah," Harry said, "You can ask him tomorrow, Ti. We'll go with you."

"Thanks," Ti said.

Sirius bid goodbye to them after that, telling Ti not to worry anymore.

Unfortunately, he was wrong.

The next day, the New Marauders were all eating breakfast together after a good workout and martial arts practice when a large majestic-looking owl swooped into the Great Hall and dropped a letter with an elaborate seal on Ti's lap.

Harry, who was seated beside Ti, saw that the younger boy's hands were shaking as he picked it up.

"What is it, Ti?" Harry asked, "Who is it from? What's that seal?"

"I-i-it's the Malfoy family seal," Ti said, shaking, "It must be from F-f-father."

Ti shakily broke the seal and opened the letter. He read it then, uttering a gasp, dropped it and ran from the Hall.

Harry and his friends were stunned and alarmed. Rose and Ginny immediately ran off after Ti. Harry picked up the letter and read it.

Tiberius,

I am deeply disappointed in you. I had hoped the damned Sorting Hat had made a mistake the first time when it placed you in that despicable house and not in noble Slytherin.

Unfortunately, for you that is, I was wrong. It appears you lack the qualities that make a proper Slytherin, and, in essence, a proper Malfoy.

Ever since you were born, I had hoped that I had another son to proudly bear the family name and devote to Salazar Slytherin's noble cause of blood purity. As you were growing up, I watched your interactions with Draco. I was disappointed when you did not seem to defend yourself in the proper Slytherin manner, instead resorting to physical means like some dirty muggle to fight your brother. I had hoped you would be more cunning in your later years. But it was not to be.

In retrospect, I should not have allowed your mother to change my mind on sending you to Durmstrang instead of Hogwarts. You would have been forced to develop the proper qualities of a Malfoy to survive or perish. The latter would have been preferable to you betraying your family by allowing yourself to be in Gryffindor.

In addition to being in that despicable house, you have the temerity to associate with the Potter brats and other blood traitors. That is the last straw.

As head of the Malfoy family, I hereby disown you. As of this moment, I only have one son and heir. As such, you need not return to Malfoy Manor for Christmas or the summer holidays. Whatever possessions you have at the Manor will be sent to Hogwarts. Never ever darken our lives again.

Lucius Malfoy

Harry felt a hot rage go through him, doubling within seconds as he felt Ginny's own rage. He flung the letter down. He was barely aware of it being picked up by Hermione.

That freaking bloody bastard!

Language, Harry! He heard in his head.

Not now. Where's Ti?

We're in the Quidditch pitch.

Harry heard Hermione gasp as she reached the end of the letter. He was already at the door of the Great Hall.

In less than a minute, he was at the Pitch. Ti was sitting on the ground, his legs drawn to his chest and his arms clutching them. Ginny and Rose were sitting beside him, unsure what to do.

Harry dropped to his knees beside Ti and hesitantly placed a hand on the younger boy's shoulder.

“Hey, you okay?” He asked. Stupid! Of course, he isn’t okay. How would you feel if your family disowned you.

Ti didn’t answer. He started to rock back and forth.

Harry heard footsteps behind them and looked over his shoulder. He saw Hermione and the others come running up, worry and anger on their faces.

Rose moved to kneel in front of Ti and placed her hands on his shoulder. “Ti, come on. Don’t dwell on this. It’s going to be all right.”

He looked angrily up at her. “How can you say that? I’ve been disowned by my family! I’m no longer a Malfoy. I’m no one.” He then hugged his knees and started to cry.

The others looked at each other, unsure what to say.

Finally, Rose moved forward and wrapped her arms around Ti. Ginny moved to hug them both. Harry placed a hand on Ti’s shoulder and squeezed gently.

“You are someone, Ti,” Rose said, “You’re our friend.”

“That’s right, TI,” Harry said, “You are our friend and a fellow Marauder.” The others joined in with a chorus of ‘Yeah’, ‘that’s right’ and ‘you’re one of us’.

Ti pulled back from Rose and wiped his eyes. “Th-thanks, guys,” he said, “I’m glad.”

“You okay now, Ti?” Rose asked.

“Um, not really,” he answered, “But I guess I will be.”

Rose nodded and she, Ginny and Harry helped him up.

“I guess I will be staying here at Hogwarts for Christmas after all,” Ti said sadly.

“Well, you won’t be staying here alone,” Harry said, “I’ll ask Dad and Mum to let me stay here with you. I’m sure Rose will, too.” Rose smiled at him, showing she agreed with him.

“Hey,” Ginny said, “If you two are staying, so am I.” The look she gave Harry told him that keeping Ti company wasn’t the only reason she was staying. She then looked at Ron.

Ron sighed, “Oh, all right. I’m staying too if Mum will let us.”

Ginny and Rose looked at the others.

“Hey, so will we,” the twins said together.

“Um, sorry, guys,” Hermione said, looking embarrassed, “I promised my parents already that I’d be home for Christmas. But I’ll try to come back early.”

“Me, too, guys,” Neville said, “I have to be home for Christmas. Maggie will kill me if I’m not. I’ll try to be back before New Year’s.”

“Maggie?” Ti asked, “Who’s she? Do you have a girlfriend already, Neville?”

Neville’s cheeks turned pink and he sputtered, trying to answer.

Rose and Ginny laughed and Harry and the others grinned. Ti looked in confusion at them.

“No, Ti,” Harry said, smiling, “Maggie’s Neville’s sister. Neville doesn’t have a girlfriend yet,” Harry grinned as he added, “Unless he’s been keeping it from us.” *Who said Ti didn’t have anything Slytherin in him.* Neville’s face turned as red as the Weasleys’ hair.

“Yeah, Ti, cute little girl,” Fred said.

“Who’ll be here next year,” George said.

“Though you may meet her,” Fred said.

“Even before then,” George finished up.

“All right you two,” Hermione said, “That’s enough teasing.”

They moved out of the Quidditch Pitch and walked back to the castle.

When they reached the Entrance Hall, Ti thanked them all for being willing to stay for him.

“Now, I wish I knew where to stay once summer starts,” he said sadly.

“Are you daft, Ti?” Harry asked, “I know of someone who’d be willing to put you up during the summers.”

“Who would that be, Harry?” Ti asked, his face showing his skepticism.

“You’re joking, right?” Harry asked, one eyebrow raised. “You don’t know anyone who was delighted to meet you and spend time with you during Hogsmeade weekends?”

“Of course, Harry!” Rose said, “Who else but Sirius.”

Ti’s eyes lighted up with hope, “You think he would?”

“Of course, Ti,” Harry said, “All we have to do is ask. Maybe he can spend Christmas with us here at Hogwarts. Come on, we have to talk to Dumbledore.”

Chapter 27: Christmas with Ti

Disclaimer: I don't own anything you recognize but Rose, Maggie and Ti are my own inventions.

Dumbledore was saddened by news of Ti's expulsion from his family. He told Ti that he would still be allowed to use the surname of Malfoy while at Hogwarts until Ti either was adopted by another family or reached his seventeenth birthday at which time he could choose his own name. Dumbledore also allowed Ti to stay at Hogwarts, though he needed to find a place to stay over the summer as no student was allowed to live in Hogwarts during the summer holidays.

Dumbledore gave Harry and Ron permission to ask their parents to ask for permission to stay at Hogwarts with Ti during the Christmas break.

When Harry reluctantly told his mother the reason why Ti was not going to Malfoy Manor for the holidays, Lily became furious and wanted to invite Ti over to Potter Manor. Harry told her that maybe they'd bring him over for Christmas day but for now, Ti would be more comfortable at Hogwarts.

Molly also wanted to have Ti over at the Burrow for Christmas so Harry and the others promised to talk to him about having dinner on Christmas day at the Weasley's home.

Molly told Ron to tell Percy to stay so he could keep an eye on his younger brothers and sister. Ron grinned, knowing his older brother didn't like babysitting, especially as his girlfriend was going home for the holidays.

Later that afternoon, Harry, Rose, Ron and Ginny accompanied Neville and Hermione to the Hogsmeade train station on board the horseless carriages. They helped them get their trunks into the train. Neville and Hermione again promised to try to get back early as they said their goodbyes.

As the train was pulling out, Harry saw Draco leaning out one of the windows, a big smirk on his face. "Enjoy your holiday with my non-brother, Potter!" the Slytherin boy yelled as the train moved faster.

Harry glared after the train. *I'm giving it to that git when he gets back.*

We all will, Harry, all the Marauders together.

He looked behind him and locked gazes with Ginny. *We have to talk.*

All right, tonight, at midnight, in the common room.

Dinner that night was done in one table as there were few students left at Hogwarts. Aside from the Potters, Weasleys and Ti, there were only three Ravenclaws and four Hufflepuffs left and no Slytherins.

Remus ate with them and entertained them with some hilarious stories about Sirius during their time at Hogwarts. He was sympathetic about Ti's situation and helped Harry compose a letter to Sirius.

That night, Harry made sure that Ron was asleep before putting on a robe and creeping down to the common room. When he arrived, it was empty. He sat down in one of the armchairs in front of the dying fire. He pulled his wand out and muttered a spell, causing the fire to flare back to life. Then he leaned back and waited.

After a few minutes, he felt the presence of another and knew without turning around who it was. The other person took the armchair opposite his.

"Hi," he said softly, looking at Ginny. She was dressed in a light green nightgown. She looked nice in it.

"Hi," she answered back shyly.

The silence between them stretched for several minutes as both of them stared into the fire. Finally, Harry looked up and said, "So, I guess something happened to us in the Chamber."

"You mean other than you rescuing me?" she asked, smiling shyly.

"Yeah," Harry said, smiling back, "So, when did you notice you could sense what I was feeling?"

She leaned back in the chair, her face screwed up in thought, “I guess it was the first time I came to your place last summer. I started getting flashes of annoyance or irritation that got stronger when I looked up to your room.”

“I could feel your glee and happiness that day as you and Rose played in the garden,” Harry said, “But that wasn’t the first time I felt your emotions.”

“It wasn’t?” Ginny asked.

“No,” Harry said, “I first felt your feelings that night in Dumbledore’s office. I could feel your sadness and fright. I didn’t think much of it at the time but then next day, I felt your relief when no one brought up what had happened and later, in the Feast, your joy. Then, as the summer passed, I felt more and more of your feelings.”

“It got stronger with me, too, Harry,” Ginny said, “and not just your feelings.” She looked directly in his eyes. *I could sense your thoughts when we started doing that martial arts stuff.*

Harry returned her gaze. *I know. I could do the same thing. I guess that’s why we could barely hit each other whenever we sparred. Now, we can even send thoughts to each other.*

Then, Ginny suddenly leaned back in her armchair, hugging herself.

Harry felt fear and apprehension coming for her. He rushed out of his chair over to her, kneeling down in front of her.

“What’s happening to us, Harry?” she asked him, the fear evident in her voice.

Harry placed a hand gently on her knee. “I don’t know, Gin,” he said, “I don’t really know. But please, tell me. Is it really bad, sensing each other’s feelings, being able to share our thoughts?”

She thought about it for a moment. “Not really, Harry. I was just worried you wouldn’t want to be this way with me.”

Harry raised one eyebrow, "Why ever not?" he asked her, "You're my friend, as well as my sister's best friend. You're also a pretty, smart and loving person. So, don't ever think I mind what's happening to us." He had felt a twinge of disappointment from her when she heard him call her a friend, but Harry ignored it for now. "Just think how much fun it will be being able to talk without anyone knowing we are."

She giggled, "Oh yes, we can share secrets and information without anyone knowing. What's the farthest we can be to speak to each other with thoughts alone?"

"I don't know," Harry said, "Right now, after what happened this morning, I'd say the farthest we can do it is the distance from the Great Hall to the Quidditch Pitch."

"Well," Ginny said, "I think that's something we should test during this holiday."

Harry grinned, "I agree. We will. Now, I think we should get some sleep."

Ginny then hugged him. "I'm glad you're okay with this, Harry."

Harry returned the embrace and noted how contented he felt. "I'm glad, too."

Harry drew back after a while, taking note of the blush on Ginny's cheeks, though he didn't say anything about it. "Gin, I have to tell you, I've talked to Rose about this."

She blushed again, "So have I. Well, actually she dragged it out of me the night we got back here."

"Well, it's about time you two talked about it," said a voice from behind them, "I was getting frustrated that neither of you seemed to want to talk."

They turned around and found Rose standing there in her nightgown, a smirk on her face.

“My, what a picture you two are right now,” she said, a grin now on her face, “It’s a good thing Ron isn’t the one who found you two.”

Puzzled, Harry and Ginny looked down and found that they still had their arms around each other. They jumped apart quickly and looked away from each other.

“Um, well, I think we should go to bed now,” Harry said, his cheeks heating up.

“Yeah,” Ginny said, “I think we’ve finished up for now.”

With that, they rushed up to their respective stairs, past the smirking Rose.

The next three days passed with the seven Gryffindors enjoying themselves around Hogwarts and in Hogsmeade. Ti received special permission from Dumbledore and McGonagall to visit the village, as he had no guardian at the moment. Percy avoided the others except for meals, which was fine with them as they were also busy planning pranks to play on the school populace once the new term started.

The day before Christmas, the seven friends received a surprise when Sirius came into the Great Hall while they were having lunch.

Harry and Rose ran up to the black-haired man, while Ti followed reluctantly after a push from Ginny.

“What are you doing here, Sirius,” Harry asked, grinning as he hugged his godfather.

“Hey,” Sirius said, grinning as he returned the embrace, “can’t a guy visit his godson and that godson’s sister and his nephew, not to mention their friends without a reason?”

He also hugged Rose and then turned to Ti who was standing uncertainly at a distance.

“Hey, you,” Sirius said to the younger boy, opening his arms, “come on over here and give your old uncle a hug.”

Ti hesitantly approached Sirius, then embraced him when the man enfolded him in his arms, tears running down his cheeks.

"Come on, Ti," Sirius said gently, "I think we should have a talk." He led the boy away and out of the Great Hall.

Harry and Rose watched them leave and Rose turned to her brother, "What's that about?" she asked.

"I have an idea, sis," Harry said, "but we'll have to wait for Sirius to tell us. Come on, let's get back to the others. There's a treacle tart with my name on it."

Rose rolled her eyes and playfully slapped her brother's arm as they walked back to the table.

Sirius and Ti were not back by the time they had finished lunch. To pass the time, the remaining six Gryffindors decided to have a three-on-three Quidditch game. Harry, Ginny and Rose were on one team with Harry and Ginny as chasers and Rose as keeper while the twins and Ron on the other team with the twins as chasers and Ron as the keeper.

Rose smiled inwardly. She knew the twins were a formidable team as they thought alike. She also knew that with their ability to project their thoughts to each other, Harry and Ginny could be as formidable. It would be interesting which team came out on top.

After two hours, the scores were practically tied at 80-70, in favor of the Potter team. The twins were surprised at how well their sister and Harry acted together, intercepting many of their passes. They realized that it was only Ron's skill as a keeper that kept the score from being even more lopsided. Just as Ron barely blocked another of Ginny's throws, they spotted Sirius and Ti coming into the Pitch.

The six friends immediately descended and landed beside them.

Harry noted with relief that both were smiling.

"So, you guys had a good talk?" Harry asked.

Sirius grinned, "Yup." He looked down at Ti, "Go on, Ti, tell them."

Ti smiled, "Sirius is arranging to be my guardian and, if possible, adopt me."

"That's great!" Harry and Rose said together. The Weasleys agreed with them.

"Yeah," Sirius said, "the paperwork's in. Dumbledore and James have given their support in writing to the Ministry. We should hear about a decision after the holidays." He turned to Ti, "then we can show you your new home one weekend."

"So, you'll finally have someone in Grimmauld Place other than you and Remus, huh, Sirius," Harry said, "especially since Remus is here at Hogwarts."

"Yeah," Sirius said, "finally gives me a reason to clean up the rest of the place. I've told Ti all about the 'Noble House of Black' and the changes I've made to the place so far."

Ti smiled, "It'll be great to live in a place without any signs of the Dark Arts. A lot of the things in Malfoy Manor just give an aura of....wrongness, you might say. It was hard growing up there. "

Sirius placed an arm around Ti's shoulder, "Well, you won't have to worry about those things anymore."

Harry was glad for his friend and Sirius. He hoped they would be good for each other.

After a few minutes, they all went back to the castle for dinner. The kids didn't linger long in the common room afterwards but soon turned in for an early night.

The next day, Harry woke up Ti who was surprised to see several presents at the foot of his bed.

"Happy Christmas, Ti," Harry said, smiling.

“H-h-happy Christmas, Harry,” Ti said, tears of happiness running down his cheeks.

“Come on,” Harry said, “Gather up your presents. The others are waiting in the Common Room so we can open them together.”

Ti gathered the presents from the floor in front of his bed. He was heading out the door when he suddenly stopped.

“Ti?” Harry asked, “What is it?”

“I-I, I didn’t get anyone anything,” Ti said, new tears forming in his eyes, “I don’t have much money anymore since, since I was, was disowned.”

Harry placed a hand on Ti’s shoulder, “Ti, don’t worry about it. Your being here with us is enough. The chance you could be with Sirius and maybe be like a son to him is as good a present as I could want, so don’t you worry about not having anything to give us.”

Ti nodded, touched by Harry’s words. The two boys descended the stairs down to the Common Room. The others greeted them and they all turned to their presents.

No one had any complaints about their presents, especially Ti. He had gotten a wand holster from Harry and Ron, a book on Quidditch from Ginny, Rose and Hermione, a whole bunch of Zonko products from the twins and a book on defense from Remus and Sirius. There was even the traditional Weasley jumper for Ti, in red and gold with a white T on the back.

Harry could tell from Ginny’s thoughts and feelings that she liked the gift he had gotten for her – a silver pendant in the shape of a cat with tiny green eyes. He knew she loved cats.

He also liked the gift she and Rose had given him – a practice snitch with his name engraved on it. He thanked Ginny mentally and felt happy when she smiled and thought a ‘you’re welcome’ back to him.

They then went to the Great Hall for a sumptuous breakfast.

The Potter siblings helped Ti floo over to Potter Manor after breakfast while the Weasleys went home to the Burrow for a while. As soon as Harry, Rose and their guest stepped out of the fireplace, Harry called out, "Mum! We're here."

In moments, Lily appeared at the doorway from the kitchen. She hugged her children then stepped in front of Ti, who was standing off to one side.

"Hello again, Ti," she said, smiling, "Welcome to our home. Welcome to Potter Manor." She then stepped forward and hugged him.

Ti's cheeks went red as he awkwardly returned the embrace. "Thanks, Mrs. Potter," he said, his voice muffled, "Thanks for having me over."

Lily released him and smiled down at him, "It's a pleasure, Ti," she said, "Any friend of my kids is always welcome here. Now, I have things to do in the kitchen. Harry and Rose will show you around."

"Come on, Ti," Rose said, grabbing his hand, "Let's go this way."

Harry followed as Rose led Ti from room to room. Ti was surprised at the beauty and brightness of the Potter's ancestral home.

"This is really nice," Ti said, shyly, "It's not as large as Malfoy Manor, but there's none of that feeling of eeriness or wrongness. In fact, it feels so warm and friendly here."

"Thanks," Rose said, beaming at him.

After the tour of the interior of the house, they took him out back and showed him the garden and Quidditch Pitch. This delighted Ti since Malfoy Manor didn't have its own Quidditch Pitch. Seeing his excitement, Harry lent him his old Cleansweep and the three kids chased each other around the Pitch while waiting for the other guests to arrive.

Soon, the Weasleys, Remus, Sirius and Professor Dumbledore came over to fill the Potter home with Christmas joy.

Ginny introduced Ti to her parents, who looked glad to finally meet the younger Malfoy boy.

Ti looked shyly at Mrs. Weasley, "Thank you for the sweater, Mrs. Weasley," he said softly, a shy smile on his face, "It's the first piece of clothing I have in Gryffindor colors that's not a school uniform." He was surprised when Molly pulled her into a fierce hug.

"You're welcome, dear," she said, when she finally released him, "It's the least I could do after hearing what your father did. That awful man, how could he do that to his own flesh and blood." Her eyes looked wet and Ti didn't look far from crying himself.

Arthur put his arms around his wife, "Now, now, Molly, let's not upset the poor lad. Come on, it's Christmas, a time of joy and fun." Giving an apologetic look to Ti, he led Molly toward the dining room.

Before Ti could start to feel sorry for himself again, Rose came up and tugged on his arm, "Come on now, Ti, let's go to the Ballroom. Remus is about to play on the piano some carols. He's really good." Ti allowed himself to be dragged to the crowd of people around the grand piano.

As they sang, it became apparent to the others that Ti didn't know any of the Christmas songs they were singing. Sirius and Harry took it upon themselves to teach him the songs with the help of some sheet music. Once he was comfortable with the songs, Ti turned out to have a pretty good singing voice.

After lunch, the kids moved to the family room where they introduced Ti to Muggle videogames. He was a bit apprehensive at first since he had been taught from birth to dislike, if not hate, muggle devices. But after a while, he was enjoying the game *DOOM*.

In the late afternoon, all the people moved to the Burrow for dinner. Ti was even more impressed with the Weasley home. He thought it was more inviting and friendly than Malfoy Manor, for which he received another smothering hug from Molly.

As usual, the meal prepared by Molly was delicious and everyone ate until they were bursting. Ti commented that he had never tasted such

good food, even at Hogwarts. This comment brought tears of joy to Molly's eyes and she wondered to her husband how such a sweet boy could have grown up as a Malfoy.

The kids flooded back to Hogwarts before midnight and quickly went to bed, ready for pleasant dreams.

Unfortunately for Harry, that's not what he got.

Chapter 28: A nightmare and a dream come true

Disclaimer: I don't own anything you recognize; the rest is mine and mine alone.

Harry was flying on his broom, enjoying the feel of the wind against his face, as he chased after someone on a broom, someone with long red hair. He was getting closer and closer, just a few feet from the other person. The other person, a girl, looked back for an instant and Harry could hear her laughing. Just as Harry closed to within a foot of her, his surroundings changed.

He was no longer on his broom. He was standing in a strange house, at the foot of a flight of stairs. He'd never seen this place before. It looked large and old, most of it in darkness. It was night outside.

Looking up the stairs, Harry saw a stream of light coming from above. Curious, he started climbing the stairs, slowly, one step at a time. After a few minutes, he saw a partially open door through which the light was coming. He stepped up onto the landing in front of the door.

He approached the door, which slowly opened without him touching it. Within the room he saw a man he recognized kneeling before a large armchair which was faced away from him toward a fireplace with a roaring fire. It was Lucius Malfoy.

Mr. Malfoy was looking down as he knelt down on one knee. "Are you comfortable, my Lord?"

The voice that answered Lucius was cold and high-pitched, a voice Harry had last heard two years previously, coming from behind a certain professor's head. "Yes, Lucius, this place is moderately comfortable. It will suit our purposes as I knew it would. Now, where is Nagini?"

"I-I don't know, my Lord," Lucius answered, "She went to explore the house when we arrived."

"You must milk her later tonight, Lucius," Voldemort said, "I will require feeding before retiring. The journey we made was tiring." There seemed to be a note of amusement in his voice.

"Yes, my Lord," Lucius answered, a slight tone of disgust creeping in his voice.

"Do not worry, Lucius," Voldemort said quietly, "I will require the draught for only a little while longer. Once our plan comes to fulfillment, I will be whole again."

"Yes, my Lord," Lucius said. There was a pause as if he was weighing his next words. "My Lord, about the plan, surely I can do it alone."

"You dare question me, Lucius?" Voldemort said, menace in his voice.

Lucius paled again, "No, no, my Lord. I do not mean it that way. I meant that we do not need anyone else for your plan to succeed. After all, the more people who know, the greater chance for discovery."

"That may be, Lucius," Voldemort said, "But I need someone who is loyal to me."

"But, my Lord," Lucius said, "I am loyal. After all, I came looking for you. I found you."

"Don't make me laugh, Lucius," Voldemort, "You came looking for me after twelve years. You only decided to look for me because you want revenge against the Potters."

Lucius looked up then, shock on his face.

"Oh, yes, Lucius," Voldemort said, cold amusement in his voice, "I know what happened to your second son. You blame young Harry Potter for his being in Gryffindor. But you are Tiberius' father. It was your responsibility to educate him in the ideals of Salazar Slytherin. If he did not retain the right attitude and beliefs then you are the only one to blame." He paused for a moment as Lucius continued to stare at him. "So, you see, Lucius, I need someone who is both loyal and competent."

"But, my Lord," Lucius said, "I am still the one who found you and I brought that Bertha Jerkins to you."

“Ah, so true, Lucius,” Voldemort, “Yes, the information I managed to get out of her will prove useful, especially in finding my other faithful servant. Of course, the fact that she would have recognized you and caused a lot of questions as to why you were in Albania had no influence on you bringing her to me, did it?”

Lucius paled again, “Of, of course not, my Lord, I had not realized that at that time.”

“Liar,” Voldemort said again, the amusement in his voice even more pronounced, “At any rate, it was very useful information. We will leave in the morning to retrieve him. Then, we will proceed with my plan. I have an idea who will use for it.”

“Who, my Lord?” Lucius asked.

“Ah, ah, Lucius,” Voldemort said, “for now, let it be my secret. You’ll know soon enough. Now, Nagini comes and I need my draught. Turn me around from the fire.”

Lucius moved forward and turned the armchair into Harry’s line of sight.

With a gasp, Harry opened his eyes, his breathing labored as if he had been running a marathon. He realized then that he was lying in his bed in his dormitory in Hogwarts. The scar on his forehead was throbbing, like a white-hot poker had been pressed into it.

He sat up, one hand still on his scar while the other reached out for his glasses. He tried to recall the dream he had just had. It had seemed so real.

Harry, are you awake? A sleepy female voice said in his mind.

Gin? Yeah, I am. Did I wake you?

Maybe, I have a bit of a headache, just when I woke up.

Sorry, Ginny. My scar’s hurting. I’m sorry you can feel it. Um, did you have a strange dream, involving Lucius Malfoy?

I don't think so. Why?

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. *Oh, it's not important right now. Go back to sleep, Ginny. We can talk in the morning. My scar's pain is lessening so your headache must be, too.*

Yeah, it is less. You're sure you're all right?

Yeah, I can go back to sleep in a while. Thanks for asking.

Anytime, Harry. I guess that's one of the benefits that this thing we share will have. Good night.

Good night, Gin.

Harry felt her go back to sleep. Then, after a few more minutes, he tried to remember the details of the dream. They were slowly fading from his memory.

What he did remember was Lucius talking to Voldemort in a strange, almost deserted house. Bits of their conversation were on the edge of his memory, of someone or something called Nagini Voldemort needed, a plan, a person they had captured for information. Harry finally gave up and sank back on his bed. He soon dozed off.

A few hours later, Harry came down into the Common Room to find Ginny waiting for him, a book on her lap. The room was otherwise empty.

"Good morning, Harry," she said, "Were you able to go back to sleep?" *And what was that about a dream with Lucius Malfoy in it?*

"Yes," Harry replied, "I got back to sleep okay. *You did hear that then. Let's talk later.*

She gave a single nod of her head, "The others have gone to breakfast already." *Let's talk now.* She dragged him over to one of the couches in front of the fireplace.

"All right," she said softly as soon as they were seated, "what did you see?" *Was Voldemort in this dream?"*

Harry's eyes widened in surprise from her perceptiveness. *Yeah, he was. How'd you know?*

I don't know. I just felt it would. Please, tell me about it.

All right, I don't remember that much but here goes.

Harry then tells her all he remembers about the dream until he woke up with his scar hurting.

"Has your scar hurt before, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Two years ago," Harry replied, "I never did get to ask Dumbledore about that. It hurt on and off then but it really throbbed when I confronted Quirrell who had Voldemort on the back of head."

"I think you should tell the headmaster about that, Harry," Ginny said, "that and the dream. Maybe he can make some sense of what Malfoy and Voldemort are up to. Maybe we should even talk to him about this mental thing we share."

"I don't know, Gin," Harry said, "Let's start with this dream and the scar first. I want this thing we share to remain between us for now, okay?"

"Okay, Harry," Gin said, smiling, "Now, let's get some breakfast. I'm starved."

Harry smiled, grabbing her hand and leading her through the Portrait. He felt a tremor in her hand for a moment. He also felt a swirl of butterflies in the pit of his stomach.

After breakfast, Harry purposely lagged behind as their group moved to leave the Great Hall. When the others had left, Harry approached Dumbledore.

"Uh, Professor," he said, "can I talk to you later tonight? There's something I need to tell you and it may take a while. I don't want my friends to worry."

"Of course, Harry," Dumbledore said, "Come up to my office at about 9 o'clock. The password is 'toffee tonsures'."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, "Thanks."

Later that night, Harry pretended to be tired and went to his dorm. He arranged his bed and pillows to appear that he was already asleep. Then he put on his invisibility cloak and sneaked down to the Common Room. Ginny, whom he had told where he was going, distracted the others so they didn't notice the Portrait Hole opening and closing without anyone near it.

When he got to the gargoyle blocking the stairs to Dumbledore's office, Harry removed the cloak and gave the password. The gargoyle stepped aside and allowed Harry access to the moving staircase. Harry knocked on the door once he got there.

"Come in, Harry," Dumbledore said, "Please take a seat."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, sitting down in a chair in front of Dumbledore's desk.

"Now, what is it you want to tell me?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry then recounted as much of his dream as he could, ending his story with walking up with his scar burning. He didn't mention Ginny.

At the end of Harry's tale, Dumbledore sat silently staring at the ceiling, obviously deep in thought.

After a couple of minutes, Dumbledore looked at Harry, "Harry, has your scar bothered you before?"

"Well," Harry said, "yes, sir. It was two years ago, during that time with the Stone. It would hurt on and off after Christmas. But the worst was during my confrontation with Quirrell and Voldemort." He gazed at Dumbledore with fear in his eyes, "Sir, what does this mean?"

Dumbledore sighed, "I believe it means you have a connection with Voldemort through your scar. It probably an effect of the curse he threw at you."

Harry gulped. *A connection? Through my scar? Can he feel me? Can he feel Ginny through me?*

Harry? What is it?

Gin, I have to tell him about what we have. I don't want Voldemort to get at you.

Are you sure, Harry?

Yes, Ginny. I don't want you to get hurt from Voldemort if we have a connection.

All right, Harry, if you think it's best.

"Harry?" Dumbledore asked, "What is it? You seemed to be far away from here for a moment."

"Professor," Harry said, "There's something else you have to know. Something happened between me and Ginny that night we were in the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry told Dumbledore about him and Ginny feeling each other's emotions and hearing each other's thoughts, and being able to converse with their minds.

Again, Dumbledore became thoughtful. "That's interesting, Harry. You say that all this started the night after you rescued Miss Weasley from the Chamber?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, "Do you know why we can do all that stuff. I mean, it's brilliant and everything. But, why us?"

"I'm not exactly sure, Harry," Dumbledore said, "But I have my suspicions. Tell me Harry, how do you feel about Miss Weasley?"

Harry was surprised by the question, "What do you mean, sir? What do I feel about Ginny? I feel she's brilliant, funny, smart, a great Quidditch player."

"That's what you think about her, Harry," Dumbledore said, "But, what do you **feel** about her?"

"Er, **feel** about her, sir?" Harry asked, turning red, "I, I like her a lot, she's been a very good friend, this feeling and thought sharing thing not withstanding."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow, his eyes twinkling, "Just a good friend, Harry? The reason I asked that is because of my suspicions. What you and Miss Weasley have been going through may be the formation of a soul bond."

"A soul bond?" Harry asked, "What's that?"

Dumbledore smiled, "It's a type of magical bonding entered into by two people who have fallen in love with each other at a young age. This bond allows the two to share their thoughts and feelings and to sense each other over long distances. This reinforces their love and sustains them for their entire life. However, the negative side of the bond is that when one of the couple dies, the other does not linger long in this world, which is why few people nowadays are willing to have the bond formed."

"Now, usually the bonding requires an advanced form of ritual which establishes the bond and its abilities immediately. However, there have been times when the bond forms naturally as the result of one of the couple risking his life for the other. The exact circumstances necessary when this occurs are not known. It simply happens. In such cases, the bond forms gradually over several weeks to months. In the end, it is much stronger than the type formed by the ritual."

Harry was stunned. Did it mean he was in love with Ginny? He thought about the strange sensations he had been experiencing whenever she was near him starting the previous year. He'd known her his whole life and had to admit that he had never minded her presence. Did that mean that he loved her? Harry then smiled. It probably did and he thought that was brilliant.

"Maybe, you're right, sir." Harry said, "But if I have a connection to Voldemort and can feel Ginny, then does that mean..."

"No, Harry!" Dumbledore interrupted Harry, "That is different. The connection you may have to Voldemort through your scar has nothing to do with the Bond. They are on separate levels. Your scar is there because of Voldemort's hate and fear. The bond is a connection of love, something Voldemort cannot understand. So there is no way he can feel or harm Ginerva that way."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief then he looked up at Dumbledore. "Uh, sir, can we keep this Bond thing a secret, just between you, me and Ginny? We might tell our parents someday soon, but other than that, I think it should be something private between us."

Dumbledore smiled again, "Ah, of course, Harry. The Bond is a beautiful thing yet something that belongs only to the two bonded." He then looked up at his clock, "Well, I think you should get back to Gryffindor Tower. It's getting late. I believe your other half may be waiting for you." The twinkle was there again in his eye.

Harry felt himself blush, "Uh, yes, sir. Goodnight then, Headmaster." He got up and walked to the door.

"Good night, Harry," Dumbledore said.

When Harry got back to the Gryffindor Common Room, he wasn't surprised to find it empty except for Ginny. She was sitting in an armchair, watching the Portrait Hole.

Harry walked over and sat next to her. "Hey! So, did you hear all that?"

"Um, yeah," Ginny said, quietly, "All of it. A soul bond! That's really, wow!"

They were silent for a while.

Then Ginny said, shyly, "Harry, was it true, what you were thinking about me? You know, being brilliant, and all."

Harry looked at her and said, "Of course, it's true." He moved closer to her. Their faces were now mere inches apart. "You're the prettiest,

funniest and smartest girl I know and I've known you all my life. I love you." With that, Harry brushed her lips with his.

When he pulled back, he was alarmed to see tears in her eyes. "Ginny, what's wrong?"

She shook her head, "Nothing, Harry. It's just that, hearing those words from you has been my dream since I was like eight. I've known you for longer than that, not as the Boy-who-lived but as the real Harry. I love you, too." She pressed her lips to his. When she pulled back, several seconds later, they were both grinning.

After staring at each other for a while, Harry said, "So, now what?"

She playfully slapped him in the arm. *What do you think, you silly prat?*

Harry smiled, *Um, will you be my girlfriend?*

"Yes!" Ginny said, throwing her arms around her neck and giving him a quick kiss on the lips.

Harry grinned as he placed his arms around her waist, "Brilliant." Then his face fell.

"What is it?" Ginny asked, "What's wrong?"

"I just remembered Ron said last year that he'd break the arms of the first guy who kissed you," Harry said.

Ginny frowned, "Don't worry about Ron, or any of my brothers. They've known you for a long time. They'll be okay with this or they'll regret it."

Harry grinned again. Ginny was a real force when she was angry, something he'd seen for years and experienced a few times. *I wouldn't want to face her temper now.*

No, you wouldn't, Potter, especially now I have a claim on you.

Oh, do you now?

Oh, yes. You better watch it, this Bond thing will make it hard for you to hide from me.

As if I want to. I promise, Gin, we'll be together forever. Now, we better get to bed.

Ginny smiled, "I guess so. Good night, Harry." She gave him a peck on the lips.

"Good night, Gin," Harry said. He watched her climb the stairs to her dorm then went up to his own. He went to bed with a smile on his face. His dreams that night were more pleasant, dreams of flying alongside Ginny.

Chapter 29: Family time

Disclaimer: I don't own anything you recognize; the rest is mine and mine alone.

A/N: Wow, I've gotten more than a hundred reviews already and am on the alert list of over a hundred people! Thanks, guys and gals. This chapter is pure fluff and romance. Enjoy.

The next morning, Harry came down into the Common Room to find Ginny again waiting for him. This time, he smiled and said "Good morning, Gin," before giving her a kiss on the cheek then he sat beside her.

She smiled back at him, "Any dreams last night?"

Harry looked down at his feet as he blushed, "Yeah, all of you and none of Voldemort."

"Good," she said, giving him a quick kiss on the lips. She took his hand in hers and pulled him up as she stood, "Let's get some breakfast."

They walked down to the Great Hall holding hands. It felt strange but Harry was elated to be doing that. *It'll take some getting used to but I like it.*

Ginny smiled at him, apparently picking up his thought. *Definitely, but I like it, too.*

They entered the Hall, still holding hands, went up to the lone table, and sat side by side, a little closer to each other than usual.

Harry glanced quickly around the table to gauge the reactions of the various people seated there.

Ron was busy eating, so it seemed he hadn't noticed their entrance. Rose had a smirk on her face as she ate her cereal. Ti just smiled. Remus and Dumbledore didn't say anything though they both had a twinkle in their eyes and a smile on their faces. Disturbingly, the twins grinned and wagged their eyebrows.

Not good. Harry thought.

Don't worry about it, Harry. I'll talk to them.

Okay. At least they're not glaring at me. I wonder when Ron will notice we're friendlier than usual.

Ginny snorted. Ron didn't notice. It may take a while. He's pretty thick when it comes to certain things.

Maybe I should tell him before the rest of the school comes back.

It's up to you, Harry. I don't care if he knows or not. It's none of his business.

Well, I don't want to antagonize my best friend, but I guess we can wait a few days.

They finished breakfast quietly. After that, they all went outside to play in the snow that had fallen the night before. Harry and Ginny stayed near each other.

When Ron had gone to use the bathroom, the twins came up to Harry and Ginny and slipped their arms around them, sly grins on their faces.

"Well, well, Harry, sis," Fred said.

"We noticed that..." said George.

"...the two of you were..." Fred continued.

"...holding hands on the way...." George said.

"...into the Great Hall. So..." Fred said.

"....is there something we...." George said.

"...should know....." Fred said.

"...about you two?" George asked.

Ginny glared at the two while Harry just turned red.

"Oh, we see," Fred said, and he began to sing, "Harry and Ginny sitting in a tree"

"K-I-S-S-I-N-G," George continued, "then comes..."

Ginny pulled her wand out, "Continue with that song, Gred and Forge, and you'll be wearing bat bogeys for the rest of the day."

The twins gulped and held their hands up in supplication.

"Temper, temper, Ginny," Fred said, "Don't take offense."

"Yeah," George said, "We're actually glad you and our esteemed leader have gotten together."

"Right," Fred said, "We're happy for you. The one you have to worry about is Ron."

At the mention of his best friend, Harry's face fell.

Ginny saw the look on his face and gently touched his arm with her hand, "Hey, don't worry about it, Harry. Ron knows I'll hex him into next week if he says anything bad."

"And I'll help her," Rose said, coming up behind them, causing all of them to jump. She placed her arms around Harry and Ginny, "I'm glad you guys have paired up. I've always wanted to have Ginny as a sister. Now, she'll be my sister-in-law."

Harry blushed, "Er, I don't think we're at that point yet, sis."

"Right," Rose said, a smirk on her face, "You just keep thinking that."

The twins and Rose then left the two alone.

Ginny turned to Harry with a questioning look *Oh, and what was that you said last night about us being together forever, Harry?*

They don't have to know that, yet, Gin. After all, we're only twelve and thirteen. It'll be years before we can get married. Ginny looked at

Harry with a smile. At least you're thinking about it. Harry grinned but didn't answer her, verbally or mentally. Ron soon joined them and they all got into a snowball fight. The day passed pleasantly for all. The next morning, they were all eating breakfast when a familiar eagle owl came swooping in and dropped an envelope in Rose's lap before landing in front of Harry. "Hey, Artemis," Harry said, feeding her a piece of bacon, "So, how's Mum?" Rose opened the envelope and scanned the letter within. "No way!" she suddenly cried, "Harry! Mum's having twins!" "What?" Harry said, "How'd she found out?"

"She went to St. Mungo's for a check-up yesterday with Dad," Rose said, reading the letter slowly, "The medi-witch did a spell and said there are two babies, a boy and a girl." She looked up at Harry, "Isn't that great?"

Harry grinned, "Yeah, brilliant. We'll have a new brother and sister. That evens out the sexes in the family."

The others offered their best wishes. Ginny smiled at Harry, sending him her feelings of happiness and joy for his family's new members. Then she and Rose went off saying they were going to research baby names. Harry shook his head, thinking that his parents would already be doing that.

The five younger Gryffindors spent the next few days divided between finishing their holiday homework and having fun.

Hermione arrived back during lunch on the last day of December, much to the delight of her friends.

"I'm really sorry," she said as she sat down at the table, "I really wanted to come back right after Christmas day but I had to help my Mum. She's only five months pregnant but she's already having difficulty. It's too bad I'm at school here as she needs help around the house."

"That's okay, Hermione," Harry said, "Your Mum needed you. At least you're here now. And speaking of expecting mums, mine just told me she's expecting twins." He then grinned.

“That’s great, Harry,” Hermione said, hugging him, “I’m happy for you and Rose.” Then she noticed that Harry and Ginny were seated quite close to each other. She glanced at Rose, an eyebrow raised. Rose merely nodded her head once. Hermione smiled and started to eat.

That night, the group went by floo to Potter Manor to spend New Year’s Eve there. Lily was banned by her healers from travelling due to her condition so Molly graciously acceded to having the celebration at the Potter home. Rose, Ginny and Hermione hovered around Lily for most of the evening, going over name suggestions for the babies.

The babies were quite active tonight and James couldn’t help but place his hand over Lily’s swollen abdomen, trying to feel his new children moving. Harry and Rose did it too, pleased whenever they felt the slightest movement from one of their new siblings.

As midnight neared, they all went into the gardens to enjoy some fireworks Sirius and James had prepared. Ginny made her way to Harry’s side, capturing his hand in hers.

At the stroke of midnight, as the fireworks started, Harry looked Ginny in the eyes and said, “Happy New Year, love.” Then he kissed, hoping the others were too busy enjoying the fireworks to notice this. Unfortunately, he was wrong.

“Oi! What the hell are you doing kissing my sister, Potter?” they heard Ron bellow a second after they had kissed.

They turned to face him, Harry looking nervous and Ginny looking furious.

“I said,” Ron shouted, his face turning as red as his hair, “what were you doing kissing my sister, Potter, and on the lips?”

It was Ginny who answered Ron, “Why do you think, Ron? Why do you think he’d kiss me on the lips?” She had her arms planted on her hips, making her look very much like her mother, “It’s because we like each other, very much.”

“But, but, you’re only twelve. You can’t be with boys like that,” Ron said, sputtering.

By now, the rest of the people who were in the Potter garden were gathering around them, including both sets of parents.

“Only twelve, Ron?” Ginny said, still glaring at her brother, “That’s one year older than when you went with Harry, Hermione and Neville to save the Stone. That’s one year older than I was when I was possessed by Riddle. And it’s the same age you and Harry were when you went to save me in the Chamber. So, don’t use it as a reason I can’t be with Harry.” She then grabbed Harry’s hand and dragged him away.

Ron just stood there, a stunned look on his face. Hermione and Rose shook their heads and gave him looks of pity. Ti just looked embarrassed while the twins wore huge grins on their faces. Sirius and Remus were also grinning. Both sets of parents, on the other hand, had bewildered looks.

Finally, James turned to Lily and asked, “When did Ginny start to channel you and Molly?” That earned him a punch on the arm from his wife and glares from Molly and Rose.

Ginny, meanwhile, pulled Harry into the house where they ended up in the living room. Once there, Ginny dropped Harry’s hand and stood in front of the fireplace, her back to Harry and her arms crossed in front of her chest.

Harry could feel the anger and hurt whirling through her. He could hear her thoughts as she fumed.

That git. How could he do that? How dare he! I’m older than twelve after what Tom did to me.

Harry stepped up behind Ginny and slowly touched her shoulder, “Hey,” he said, in what he hoped was a soothing tone.

She suddenly turned around and threw her arms around him, “I’m sorry, Harry,” she said, her voice muffled as she had her head pressed against his chest, “I didn’t mean to blurt out our relationship for everyone to hear like that.”

Harry placed his arms around her, attempting to comfort her, "Er, that's okay, Gin. The twins and Rose already knew. Our parents would have figured it out eventually. Though I dread having to talk to Ron after tonight, what you did out there was brilliant."

She looked up at him (it wasn't that far up as Harry was only a couple of inches taller than Ginny right now), "Really?"

"Oh, yeah," Harry said, smiling now, "It really shut him up and you know how hard that is to do."

"It really did, didn't it," Ginny said, giggling, "I wish we could have taken a picture of that." She then gave him a peck on the lips as she pulled him over to one of the couches.

She made Harry sit down then sat in his lap, her head on his shoulder and her arms encircling him. Harry gently wrapped his arms around her and leaned his cheek against hers. As they cuddled, they felt a warm feeling of contentment settle over them.

"I could get used to this," Harry said, enjoying the feel of Ginny in his arms.

"You'd better," Ginny said, smiling, "I intend to do this as often as we can and for a very long time to come, at least forever."

Harry smiled but didn't answer her verbally. He let her feel his feelings of happiness and contentment. Soon, they drifted off to sleep.

Hours later, Harry's mind slowly woke up. He felt a weight on his chest and shoulders and couldn't feel his legs. He blearily opened his eyes and saw a sea of red hair resting on his shoulder. Then the redhead moved and looked at him with her gorgeous brown eyes.

Good morning, she said to him in his mind, still groggy with sleep.

Good morning, he answered her mentally, a smile forming on his face.

Are we still on the couch?

I think so.

What time is it?

I think it's probably midmorning. The sun's coming through the windows.

She looked up, alarm on her face, "You mean we slept here all night?" she asked in a whisper.

"I think so," he answered, also in a whisper, "Otherwise, we wouldn't be sitting together this way."

She buried her head in his chest, embarrassment radiating from her. *Oh my god! I bet everyone saw us this was, even our parents.*

I guess so. We're out in the open, in front of the fireplace. It's kinda hard to have missed seeing us as they came in.

Oh god, I won't be able to face my parents, or yours.

Harry gently tilted her head upwards to look at him, "Hey, I don't think we have much to worry about. I don't think our parents would have let us sleep on in this position if it wasn't okay with them."

"You think so, Harry," Ginny said, softly.

"Yeah, I think so," Harry said then he pecked her on the lips.

"Ew, okay," Ginny said, "Morning breath, not very nice. Come on, I think we'd better get up before anyone else does and get cleaned up." She got off Harry and stretched.

Harry flexed his legs, wincing as blood flow returned to them. Then he got up and took her hand. "Come on, I think you were supposed to share Rose's room with Hermione.

He led the way up the stairs to the second floor. When they got to the door to Rose's room, he wrapped his arms around Ginny again and gave her a hug, which she returned.

"I'll see you in a while," he said, giving her a peck on the cheek. He let go and walked to his room.

He slowly opened the door and peeked in. Ron and Ti were asleep side by side in his bed. He smiled, hoping his best friend was really getting along with the younger boy.

He went to his drawers, looking for clothes to change into.

"Harry?" he heard Ron say softly.

Harry turned around.

Ron was now sitting up on one side of the bed, looking at him warily. "Um, Harry, about last night, I-I'm sorry for blowing up like that. But I'm not sorry for the reason I did."

Harry frowned, "You don't approve of me dating Ginny?"

"Er, not exactly, Harry," Ron said, running his hand through his hair, "I just thought it was too early for her to be doing that."

"You know what Ginny thinks of that, don't you?" Harry asked.

Ron sighed, "Yeah, I do. I heard what she said last night," He sighed again, "Well, I had a long while to think about that. I guess she isn't young and innocent anymore. I can't imagine what it was like to be possessed by You-know-who. I guess she kinda grew up too fast."

"Yeah, Ron, she did," Harry said. He now stood before him, a bit nervous. "Did you see us in the living room last night?"

Ron ran his hand through his hair again, "Yeah, we all did." He looked sheepishly at Harry. "Look, I wanted to wake you two, but Dad told me not to. Mum wasn't too happy about that but your Mum said she'd have one of your house elves look in on you. So, we all just went up to our rooms."

"Oh," Harry said. He sat down beside Ron and regarded him for a moment. Then he said, "I love her, Ron. Don't ask me how I know, but I do. I care about her a lot. I'm not going to hurt her."

Ron looked at Harry then sighed, "All right, mate. I guess that's as good as I'll get. Heck, I've known you all my life. It might as well be

you who gets stuck with her for the rest of her life.” Then Ron grinned, “That’ll make you more than an honorary brother.”

Harry blushed, “Not for a few more years, Ron, but, eventually, yeah.”

Ron then stuck out his hand, “Good luck. You do know you’re stuck with her temper, right?”

Harry laughed as he shook Ron’s hand, “Yeah, I do, but that’s one of the things I like about her.”

Ron shook his head, bewildered, “You’re getting mental, mate. Now go on, and take a shower. I want to get some more sleep, that is, if I can sleep over Ti’s snores. Blimey, how can a tyke like him have such a loud snore?”

Harry grinned, “Apparently Ron, you haven’t heard yourself. You were that small once and that loud. In fact, you still are.” Harry laughed softly as he ducked a pillow Ron had thrown at him.

As he headed for the bathroom, Harry was glad Ron had accepted his budding relationship with Ginny. Now, he just had to see what the reaction of the rest of the school would be.

Later, as Harry came out of the bathroom, clean and dressed, he found his father waiting for him.

“Son, I think we need to talk,” James said, placing his hand on Harry’s shoulder.

Harry gulped and allowed his father to guide him into the master bedroom.

Once they were seated on the bed, James eyed Harry critically then he said, “So, you and Ginny, huh? When did this happen?”

“Er, just a couple of days after Christmas, Dad,” Harry said, “We got to talking and it came out we have feelings for each other. We, er, kissed and, um, I asked her to be my girlfriend.”

James shook his head, "What is it with Potters and redheads? At least you've gotten her this early. It was only in sixth year that I got your Mum to let me take her on a date. Now, do you need 'the talk'?"

Harry paled and his eyes bulged out, "Dad! We haven't done anything yet but kiss. What happened last night was the first time. I, uh, I don't think we're ready to anything more yet."

James wiped his hand across his brow, "That's good, Harry. I was afraid that you two had already done some 'experimenting'. I know it's hard to resist your hormones when you're a teenager. Maybe we can postpone that talk for another time, maybe this summer. Now, you let me know if you get any 'urges', okay?"

Harry felt his cheeks warm, "Uh, sure, Dad. I'll, uh, owl you." With that, Harry got up and practically ran from the room. That was certainly the most uncomfortable conversation he'd ever had with his father. Luckily, it seemed Ginny hadn't been aware of it.

Chapter 30: School time

Disclaimer: I don't own anything you recognize; the rest is mine and mine alone.

A/N: Just for clarification, from now on, anything in italics within quotation marks will be Harry and Ginny talking mentally to each other. Thanks for all the reviews. Woohoo! I've got 120 now.

The kids spent the rest of the day at Potter Manor before taking the floo back to Hogwarts with Remus, in time for the arrival of the Hogwarts Express which was carrying the rest of their school mates. They all walked down to Hogsmeade to greet it, accompanied by Remus.

When the train pulled in to the station, Neville came up to them and apologized profusely for not being with them during the holidays. His parents had taken him and his sister to visit their relatives in America.

Harry and the others brushed aside his apologies and got him to talk about the things he saw across the pond, as Brits often referred to the Atlantic Ocean.

They had to divide into two carriages. Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione and Ti took one while Fred, George, Rose and Neville took another. Harry did note that Ti seemed a little disappointed with those arrangements.

"I wonder what's up with him." He wondered.

"I think he wanted to ride beside someone else," Ginny told him

"Oh? Who?"

Harry felt a bubble of amusement come from Ginny. *"Rose. I think he's got a crush on her."*

"Huh? How...when...why?"

Ginny smiled at him. *"I don't know why. Maybe he was touched by the things she and I did for him this year. I did notice he seemed to prefer her company more often."*

"But why her and not you?"

Ginny shrugged. *"Would you mind, Harry, if he had a crush on me?"* she asked softly.

"Well, um, probably not, as long as I know you don't return his feelings,"

"Why, Harry, I didn't think you'd be the jealous type," she said, amusement in her thoughts.

"Yeah, well, um," Harry said, intelligently.

"Don't worry, Harry. You'll never have a reason to be jealous. My heart is yours and yours alone." Ginny punctuated this with a kiss on the lips.

"Oi," Ron said, "Not in front of me, please."

Ginny sent him a smile before giving Harry another kiss, causing Ron to scowl.

They arrived at the castle before Ron could make any other comment. They then followed the rest of the students into the Great Hall for the Return Feast. The four long tables were back in their usual places, laden with empty bowls and plates.

Harry, Ginny, Hermione and Ron sat together on one side of the Gryffindor table while Rose, Ti and Neville sat on the other side, opposite them. Fred and George spotted Katie, Angelina and Alicia and sat beside them.

Once all the students were seated, Dumbledore stood up and smiled as he looked them over, "Welcome back, my dear students. I hope you enjoyed the holidays. I know a few of you had an interesting time." His gaze seemed to linger over the group of Harry and Ti for a few seconds, his eyes twinkling. "Now, I know many of you are tired

from the long journey back and want to get some rest for classes tomorrow, so let the feast begin.”

With that, the plates and bowls on the tables filled with food and the students began serving themselves.

Harry and the other New Marauders exchanged gazes and smiles as they ate.

Just when everybody was finishing the meal, a puff of smoke appeared at the Slytherin table. When the smoke cleared, Draco Malfoy found his robes replaced by a long flowing red gown, with high heeled shoes on his feet and his hair lengthened and in pigtails. He let out a yelp and ran from the Great Hall. After a moment of stunned surprise, the rest of the school started laughing. Ti fell off the bench, clutching his stomach as he laughed. Only the Slytherin table was silent, most of that house’s members were in shock.

Snape looked around the Hall with disgust, his glare stopping when he saw Harry. Then he got up and, with a swish of his cloak, walked to the door and left. He ignored his smiling and grinning colleagues.

After a few minutes, the laughter abated and Dumbledore again stood up, “My, my,” he said, “I wonder how that happened. I hope Professor Snape can return Mr. Malfoy to normal. Now, it’s off to bed with you all.”

The students all got up and left the Great Hall, still grinning and snickering, except, of course, for the Slytherins who were now glaring at the other students.

After that night, the castle’s inhabitants got down to resuming their academic endeavors. Harry and his friends resumed their early morning workout and martial arts practice, much to Ron’s dismay.

Also to Ron’s dismay, Harry and Ginny spent as much time together as they could, meeting up for meals, studying side by side in the Common Room, walking together around the grounds. To Ron’s bewilderment, Rose didn’t seem to mind.

Unfortunately it was also at this time that Harry and Ginny first experienced a bad side to their Bond. Harry was sitting in Charms class watching Flitwick demonstrate a new spell when the diminutive professor's form wavered and Harry found himself staring at both Flitwick and McGonagall, superimposed over each other.

He shook his head but instead of clearing, he found himself looking at the Charms classroom and the Transfiguration classroom occupying the same place, in addition to the teachers.

"Er, Gin, you're in Transfiguration right now, right?" He asked Ginny with his thoughts.

"Um, yes, Harry. And you're in Charms, aren't you?" Ginny answered.

"Yeah. So, you're seeing Flitwick and McGonagall at the same time, too?"

"Yes, Harry, I am."

"Well, I guess that means we're seeing what the other is seeing at the same time."

"I guess so. This is making me dizzy."

"Yeah, me, too. I'm also getting a headache." Harry said, starting to rub his forehead.

After a couple of minutes, their visions cleared and returned to normal.

"Whoa, thank Merlin," Harry heard Ginny think.

"I guess we're back to normal, eh?"

"I guess so, Harry. But what was that?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. It may be part of the Bond. We can ask Dumbledore about it."

"Okay, Harry. See you at lunch?"

"Of course, Ginny," Harry said, a smile in his thought.

The same happened twice more that day. Harry was in Ancient Runes after lunch when he saw the Charms classroom at the same time. It passed within a few minutes but left him nauseous for another ten. Luckily, Hermione didn't notice.

It was worse later when he was in Potions. He was adding some Dragon blood to the potion they were brewing when he saw the image of a plant snapping at him. In his surprise, he dropped in more Dragon blood than was called for, causing the liquid in his cauldron to turn purple instead of orange. Then it started to emit smoke as Harry's vision returned to normal.

"Potter!" he heard Snape bellow.

He winced and had to control himself as he was berated by the Potions professor. Ron and Hermione gave him sympathetic looks though it seemed there was also a suspicious look in Hermione's eye.

When the man had finally moved away after vanishing his cauldron's contents, Harry glared at his retreating back.

I'm sorry, Harry, he heard Ginny say to him.

Harry sighed, *That's okay, Gin. It's not your fault. And Snape was just his usual slimy self. No, it's this double vision thing. We really need to talk to Dumbledore about it.*

After dinner, Harry lagged behind to ask Professor Dumbledore about speaking with him later. He was told to go to his office an hour before curfew. When Ginny wanted to accompany him, Harry only put up a half-hearted argument before agreeing.

Harry borrowed the Marauders' Map from Rose, explaining that he needed to talk with Dumbledore. He then went up to his dorm on the pretext of getting to be early and slipped into his invisibility cloak. In his dorm. He sneaked back into the Common Room. When no one was paying attention, Ginny joined him under the cloak.

They soon entered Dumbledore's office to find the headmaster waiting for them.

"Ah, Harry, Ginerva," he said, "To what do I owe the honor of your visit this evening?"

Harry launched into a narration of what the strange visions they had that day.

After Harry related the incident with Snape, Dumbledore looked thoughtful for a few seconds, stroking his beard.

"Hmmm," Dumbledore said finally, "I'm not sure about this, Harry, Ms. Weasley. I have not heard of such a thing happening. It might be an extension of the Bond that is unique to the pair of you. I suggest we observe this for a while. As long as you are aware what is happening, I do not think it will be harmful to you other than the risk for something accidental to happen with surprises, such as what Harry experienced in Potions."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other. *"What do you think, Harry?"* she asked.

"I don't know, Gin. I'd hate to have something like that happen again."

Ginny turned to Dumbledore, "Professor, is there anything we can do to lessen the effects of this?"

"I'm not sure, Miss Weasley," he answered, "I will need some time to research this. Let us give it time and we shall see what I can find out in some books I have about bonds."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other again.

"Well, I guess it's better than nothing, Harry. At least he knows and he'll try to figure something out." Ginny said to him.

"All right, I guess. We'll just have to be careful." Harry replied.

They thanked Dumbledore and returned to Gryffindor Tower.

On the following Saturday, Harry was surprised to see Sirius sitting at the Head Table when he and Ginny came down for breakfast after their regular work-out.

Hurrying over to his godfather, Harry embraced him. Sirius returned his hug then did the same with Ginny.

“Why didn’t you tell us you were coming?” Harry asked him.

“Oh, I wanted this to be a surprise,” Sirius said, “especially for Ti.”

Harry wondered what he meant for a couple of seconds before the light came on in his head.

“You mean....?” he said to Sirius.

“Shh,” Sirius said, a smile on his face, “You’ll spoil the surprise. Now, get back to your table. He could be here any minute.”

Harry and Ginny exchanged happy looks then walked back to their table, hand in hand. They agreed that it was lucky they came down before the others.

A few minutes later, Ti came in, followed by the others. They all sat at their usual places and began eating. Halfway through the meal, Rose suddenly raised her head and said, “Hey, Harry, isn’t that Sirius over there at the Head table?”

Ti’s head looked up so fast Harry thought he might have sprained something. The younger boy’s eyes widened. He started to tremble.

Rose placed a hand on his arm, “Hey,” she said softly, “why don’t we go ask him why he’s here. Come on.” She gently pulled him from his seat and they approached Sirius together. Harry and Ginny quietly followed them.

Sirius grinned when he saw the four of them come up to him.

“Hey, kiddos,” he said, hugging them in turn, “How are you guys? I bet you’re all wondering why I’m here right.”

“Yeah, we were,” Rose said.

“Well, I’ve got news,” Sirius said, “specifically for Ti. Come on, if you’re done eating, we should do this outside, away from curious gits.” He nodded toward the Slytherin table.

Harry looked in that direction and saw Draco glaring at them.

Sirius got up from the table but turned to Remus, “Moony, old pal, why don’t you join us?”

Remus smiled, “Of course, Padfoot.”

The four kids and Remus followed Sirius outside to one of the courtyards of the castle. Once there, he motioned them to sit down on one of the stone benches.

“Okay,” he said once they were all seated, “I said I had news for Ti. It’s good news actually.” He grinned as he gazed at Ti. “My boy, meet your new guardian, me.”

Ti looked at him with a stunned expression for a moment before throwing his arms around the black-haired man. The other three kids grinned.

“You did it then!” Harry said, “The ministry allowed you to become Ti’s guardian.”

“Yup,” Sirius said, as he returned Ti’s embrace, “It took a while as Lucius tried to block it. It was a really pathetic attempt, something I didn’t expect possible for that slimy git. Anyway, it was just approved yesterday. So, as of,” he looked at his watch, “two hours ago, I am officially the legal guardian of one Tiberius formerly Malfoy. Plus, since your father forbade you to use his family name, you are allowed to use mine,” Sirius smiled again, “So, from now on, you’re Tiberius Black. Congrats, kiddo.” Sirius clapped him on the shoulder before hugging him again.

“Yeah!”, “Congratulations,” and “Great!” were all uttered by Harry, Ginny and Rose as they slapped and hugged Ti in turn. Remus smiled and added his own congratulations.

“So,” Harry asked, “How does it feel, to have a family again?”

“Great!” Ti said, grinning.

“I’m glad for you, Ti,” Harry said, “though I wonder if Sirius can be a proper guardian by himself.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow at his godson, “And what do you mean by that? You turned out pretty good.”

“Only because Mum was there,” Harry said, grinning, “I shudder to wonder what would have become of me if you and Dad had been left on your own, or worse, if you had to raise me by yourself.”

“Hey!” Sirius said, scowling, “I’m not that bad.”

“Oh, sorry, Sirius,” Rose said, entering the conversation, “That is so untrue. I’ve lost track of the number of times Mum had to shout at you and Dad for indulging us.”

Harry and Rose were now smirking while Ginny and Ron exchanged looks of amusement, hands over their mouths.

Sirius glared at his best friend’s children and their friends then noticed that Remus had his own hand over his mouth, probably hiding his own smile.

“Hey, Remus,” Sirius said, “Why don’t you help me with these young whippersnappers?”

Remus raised both his hands, palms out facing Sirius, “Oh, no. I wouldn’t dare contradict my goddaughter and her brother, especially when they’re right.”

Sirius scowled as Harry, Rose, Ginny and Ron had now burst out laughing, having remembered many of the incidents Rose had been alluding to. Ti stood by, looking confused at their actions.

Remus seemed to notice and placed a comforting hand on Ti’s shoulder, “Now, don’t mind them. They do this all the time. It’s just their way of showing their affection for each other.”

Ti shook his head, still confused, "I-it's strange to see that. F-father never allowed joking around or making fun of each other like that."

Remus smiled, "Well, you'll learn that it's okay to joke around, as long as it's not done to hurt the other person."

Harry and his friends had all stopped laughing now, though they still had grins on their face.

Sirius sighed, "It's a miracle I haven't gotten gray hairs from being around these four for a dozen years now." He turned to Ti and smiled, "Well, now that these delinquents have had their fun, how'd you like to see the place you'll be coming to live in this summer?"

Ti's eyes lighted up even more. "Really?" he asked, "We can go to your place in London."

"Yeah," Sirius said, smiling, obviously pleased with Ti's reaction, "I talked to Dumbledore earlier and he gave permission to take you home today. I'll show you around and you can tell me how you'd like your room fixed up. We'll stay overnight and you can be back tomorrow after lunch."

Ti grinned and asked, "When can we leave?"

Sirius grinned, "As soon as you've packed a few things." He turned to Harry and the others, "Sorry, guys. I'd like to do this on my own. You can come with Ti another time."

Harry smiled, "That's okay, Sirius. This is something the two of you need to do alone."

They all walked back into the castle and up to Gryffindor Tower so Ti could pack.

The rest of January passed quickly after that. Fortunately for Harry and Ginny, there were only a few double vision episodes, none of them causing any damage or embarrassment. Otherwise, their relationship was proceeding well.

After waking up one morning in the first week of February, Harry happened to glance at a calendar and noted a particular date encircled in red, the 14th. He initially wondered why it was marked. Then he put on his glasses and saw the caption. He gulped.

Oh no! Valentine's Day is coming.

He reached out and felt that Ginny was still asleep. He breathed a sigh of relief. He'd heard that girls particularly liked that day, considering it a special day for romance. Harry had seen his dad try to make it a wonderful day for his mum over the years.

He wondered how Ginny would like to spend it. He'd never had a girlfriend before over which to worry about pleasing and enjoying. He needed help to make the day special for Ginny.

But who to ask? He pondered on that for a few minutes. Finally, he decided to do something he wouldn't do normally – ask his mum.

Chapter 31: First Valentine's Day together

Disclaimer: I don't own anything you recognize from the books. The rest are mine.

Harry was nervous. He hoped Ginny liked what he had planned for Valentine's Day. As Valentine's Day this year was on a Monday, Dumbledore had suspended classes in the afternoon and allowed the students to dispense with school robes during their morning classes. He also allowed the students eligible to go to Hogsmeade after lunch.

However, since Ginny was not of the age allowed to go to Hogsmeade, Harry couldn't take her there for a regular date. So Harry had decided on an alternative, based on his Mum's suggestion, for their Valentine's Day date, which was also their first actual date.

Right now, Harry tried to keep from thinking about his actual plans as he dressed for the day since he didn't want Ginny to know of his surprise yet. If he thought about it, she'd find out as they had gotten very good in reading each other's emotions and thoughts.

Once he was dressed, in jeans and a black collared shirt, Harry went down into the Common Room to wait for Ginny. After only fifteen minutes, their Bond allowed him to feel her presence as she came down the stairs from the girls' dormitories.

Harry was captivated by her beauty despite her young age and very little make-up. She was wearing a nice green turtleneck blouse (it was still cold outside) and a light yellow skirt, with a pair of sandals on her feet.

Harry was pleasantly surprised and pleased to see that she had the pendant he gave her for Christmas around her neck.

"Good morning, Ginny," Harry smiled as he mentally greeted her while she was walking down the stairs, *"You look great. Thanks for wearing the pendant."*

Ginny smiled back, blushing a bit, *"Thanks. I'm glad to wear it. You look great, too."*

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Gin,” Harry said, walking up to her as soon as she reached the bottom of the stairs and giving her a quick kiss on the lips. Luckily, Ron wasn’t in the room.

Ginny smiled and gave him another kiss, “Happy Valentine’s Day, Harry.” She pulled something out of her pocket, “and this is for you.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, taking the box carefully wrapped in paper that was red studded with white hearts. He felt a twinge of disappointment from her when he didn’t give one in return. He restrained himself and kept his thoughts firmly on the gift she had given him, “I’ll open it later. Come on, let’s get to the Great Hall. I’m starving.”

She shook her head, but took his hand and they walked down to breakfast hand in hand as was their normal way. The others were already in the Great Hall when they arrived.

While they were eating, the mail owls came. Among them was a large eagle owl that came up to Ginny and dropped a bouquet of flowers and a wrapped box into her lap.

Ginny looked at the bouquet and saw it was a dozen red roses. There was a card among the roses with her name on it.

She looked at Harry. *“Do you have anything to do with this, Harry?”*

“I might.” Harry said to her, *“Why don’t you read the card?”*

Ginny opened the card and read it.

Dearest Gin,

I hope you weren’t disappointed earlier when you didn’t get a gift from me the moment we met in the Common Room. I also hope you like these

flowers and what’s in the box. But that’s not the end of your gifts. You’ll

see later. For now, open the box. It’s the wrapped thing.

Happy Valentine's Day.

Love,

Harry

Ginny smiled up at Harry and gave him a quick kiss. Then she unwrapped and opened the box. Inside was silver bracelet with three golden charms on it – a quaffle, a cat and a heart.

Ginny threw her arms around Harry, *"Oh, Harry, I love it."* "Thanks, Harry, its great."

"You're welcome, Gin," Harry said, returning her embrace. *"I'm glad you like it."*

He pulled back, looked in her lovely chocolate brown eyes and gave her a quick kiss. He wanted to prolong it but Ron was already at the table, watching them carefully.

"Come on, Harry," Ginny said, handing him the bracelet, "Help me put it on."

Harry took the bracelet and carefully put it on her left hand, fumbling for a moment with the clasp.

Ginny admired the bracelet for a moment then turned to Harry. She smiled at him, *"Well? Aren't you going to open yours?"*

Harry smiled back, *"All right, if you insist."*

She playfully slapped his arm as he ripped the paper off and opened the box. Inside was a silver necklace with a golden snitch suspended from it.

Harry could feel the same apprehension and fear coming from Ginny that he had felt at Christmas. He grinned and took the necklace out of the box, holding it gently.

"It's great, Gin," Harry said, still grinning, "I like it." He then put it around his neck, making sure the snitch pendant was resting outside his shirt.

He turned to Ginny, "Thanks, Gin. This is really nice. I'll always wear it."

"Even in the shower?"

Harry grinned, *"Even in the shower."*

Then, Ron yelled at him, "Oi, Harry, come on or we'll be late for class. Hey! That hurt." He said the last to Hermione while rubbing his arm where the bushy-haired girl had hit him. Rose and Neville shook their heads at Ron's insensitivity while Ti just looked on a little confused.

Ginny glared at Ron for a moment before turning back to Harry, "So, see you at lunch?"

"Yeah, but not here," Harry said, smiling. *"Meet me in the clearing beside Hagrid's hut after your morning class is through."*

Ginny looked at him curiously, *"Oh? What have you planned, Potter?"*

"Tut, tut, Miss Weasley." Harry said, smiling, *"you'll find out, and no mental peeking. I won't let you know before the time is right."*

They shared one quick kiss and went their separate ways. Harry caught up with Neville, Ron and Hermione heading for Charms while Ginny joined Rose to head for Transfiguration. Ti had already joined his roommates to go to Potions.

As they walked, Rose and Ginny admired the bracelet on Ginny's wrist.

Rose shook her head, "I can't believe my brother had it in him to be so sweet."

Ginny giggled, "Well, to be honest, neither did I."

"Hey! I resent that."

“Harry! No eavesdropping! This is a private conversation.”

“Oh, all right. I just missed you.”

“Already?” Ginny giggled, “Well, I’ll see you at lunch for that surprise you have planned.”

“Oh, no. You’re not getting me to think about it so you can get a hint. I’ll see you.”

Ginny felt him turn to concentrate as Professor Flitwick started to talk to explain their lesson for the day.

“So,” Rose said, grinning, “what did my brother have to say for himself?”

Ginny smiled, “He just misses me.”

“You know,” Rose said, “It gets a bit weird when you’re talking to him without saying a word, even to someone like me who knows a bit about it.”

“Oh, Rose,” Ginny said, “I’m so sorry. We haven’t told you what Dumbledore told Harry and me that night. It was just so strange and...well, I guess we owe you that much, keeping what you know a secret. I’ll ask Harry later about it.”

“It’s all right,” Rose said, smiling a little, “I’m glad you and Harry have gotten together. I’ve seen the way you looked at him for years and noticed he was looking the same way at you for several months now. I hope you two have a nice lunch, just don’t sit too near the lake. Oh, and don’t eat the apples.”

As they had reached the Transfiguration classroom and it looked like McGonagall was already there, Ginny couldn’t question Rose on what she meant by that.

Later, after Charms, the third year Gryffindors walked down the stairs, heading for the Great Hall. Harry continued on towards the Entrance Hall, walking fast as he wanted get to Hagrid’s Hut before Ginny.

“Hey, Harry,” Ron called, “Where are you going? The Great Hall is this way.”

“I’m not going to the Great Hall for lunch, Ron,” Harry called back.

“But I heard Ginny tell you to meet up for lunch,” Ron said, starting to walk towards Harry. Hermione and Neville reached out to grab one arm each to hold him back..

“Hey, what are you holding me for?” Ron asked.

“I think Harry has something special planned for your sister for lunch, Ron,” Neville said.

“What?” Ron said, then he turned to Harry, “Hey, what have you got up your sleeve, Potter?” His face was turning red.

“That’s none of your business, Ron,” Hermione said.

“It’s bloody well my business,” Ron said turning to Hermione now, “She’s my sister and I have to look out for her.”

Hermione glared at him, “She may be your sister, Ronald, but she’s her own person. She alone should decide whom to be with.”

Hermione placed her hands on her hips as she continued talking, “I thought you were okay with Harry. You’ve known him almost all his life and he’s known her just as long. He wouldn’t hurt her or take advantage of her. He’s just got something special planned for her today. So, lay off, Ron.”

Ron looked at her, a bit embarrassed now, “Um, well, you have a point, Hermione.” then he turned back to Harry, “Sorry, mate. I guess I’m still not used to it yet. Have a good time, okay?”

Harry smiled, “Thanks, Ron. I know you still have doubts about Ginny and I. I appreciate you trying to protect her and I promise you I’ll do the same. I love her and will do whatever I need to do to keep her safe.”

With a final nod, Ron turned and walked away. Neville gave Harry a thumbs up before following. Hermione smiled and waved to Harry before doing the same.

Harry grinned as he returned the wave. He then walked out the castle's front doors and headed for Hagrid's hut. When he reached the large structure, he knocked on the door.

After a few seconds, the door was opened by Hagrid, who beamed as he saw Harry.

"Harry, it's great ta see ye."

Harry grinned, "Hi, Hagrid, oh sorry, **Professor**."

Hagrid laughed, "Oh, now. Yeh can lay off on the professor bit when we aren' in class."

"That's okay, **professor**," Harry said, "I love calling you that. Now, um, did my package arrive?" Harry struggled to keep from thinking of the contents of the package.

"Yeah," Hagrid said, "It's here, arrived just an hour ago, carried by Hedwig. I'm guessin' this has ta do with Valentine's Day an' a certain redhead." He wagged his eyebrows and winked.

Harry laughed, "Yeah, something like that." He entered the hut and spotted the wicker basket on the table. "All right, I'll just wait for Ginny to arrive."

"I'm here, Harry." Ginny called to him in his mind, *"Now, what are you planning and what's with the basket."*

Harry groaned. He'd have to concentrate better next time. He went outside with the basket and saw Ginny standing with a smirk on her face.

"All right, Ginny," Harry said, "You win. Since you can't go to Hogsmeade yet, we're having a picnic lunch near the lake. I think near the water's edge would be a good spot."

"Sure, Harry," Ginny said, smiling, "That's a wonderful idea. You know that I love picnics."

"Er, yeah," Harry said, "That's why I decided on this."

"Wait a minute, Harry," Ginny said, "Hold that thought. I think someone else suggested the picnic, since you just mentally slapped yourself for not remembering that."

"Er, no, no," Harry said, much too quickly, "whatever gave you that idea?"

"Tut, tut, Mr. Potter," Ginny said, shaking a finger at him, "*You know you can't hide much from me now with this bond we share. We share our thoughts now, so don't try to hide things from me.*"

Harry deflated, "All right, all right. I couldn't figure out where to take you for our first Valentine's Day since you weren't allowed into Hogsmeade yet, as I told you earlier. I, um, actually asked my Mum and she suggested taking you on a picnic on the school grounds. Really, Gin, I just wanted you to have a good time today, being a special day for couples and all that."

Ginny smiled and gave him a quick kiss, "That's fine, Harry. I'm touched that you wanted me to have a special day. From what I hear, most blokes just give their girlfriends a box of chocolate and flowers. But you wanted to do something more. Thank you." She wrapped her arms around him and gave him a deeper kiss. He, in turn, wrapped his arms around her waist and returned the kiss with equal enthusiasm. They would have continued that way if someone rather large hadn't cleared his voice.

They jumped apart and looked at Hagrid in embarrassment. Their friend was grinning beneath his beard.

"Sorry, yeh two," Hagrid said, "but if yeh go on any longer, yeh both may pass out from lack o' air. Plus yer food may get cold, in spite o' the preserving charm that's on it. Go on now, before it gets late."

"Thanks, Hagrid," Harry said, "I'll see you in class."

“Yeah, thank you,” Ginny, “I can’t wait to have you next year.”

Hagrid blushed as he waved them off.

Harry and Ginny walked hand in hand toward the lake. Once there, Harry moved to go down to the lakeshore where a few other people were walking, but Ginny pulled him back.

“Wait, Harry,” Ginny said, “Why don’t we have our picnic over there by that large oak tree?”

Harry raised an eyebrow at her, *“Why, Gin? It may be much better by the water.”*

Just then, a wave of water splashed up on the beach, drenching the people there who ran back shrieking. Out on the water, the tentacles of the lake’s resident giant squid could be seen waving back and forth, agitating the water.

“Whoa,” Harry said, *“Maybe you’re right.”* “Let’s set up under that large oak.”

Ginny nodded, a bit unnerved by the action of the squid.

They moved to the tree. Harry pulled a blanket out of the basket and spread it on the ground, in the shadow cast by the tree. Then, he and Ginny sat down side by side on the blanket. By now, most of the people outside had gone in to have lunch.

Harry began removing the contents of the basket and spreading it out on the blanket. Each item was placed in a covered plate and was still warm. There was a loaf of freshly baked bread, steak and kidney pie, roast beef, lamb chops, mashed potatoes, treacle tart, shepherd’s pie, pumpkin juice and two rosy red apples.

Ginny smiled. *“Harry, this is great. How’d you get all this food together?”*

Harry looked down at the blanket to hide his blush. *“Er, I got my mum to help. I think she cooked most of it. I really wanted this to turn out well.”*

Ginny grinned. *"That's great, Harry. I'm touched that you asked your mum for help. Most blokes would die before they do such a thing."*

Harry grinned and handed her an empty plate. Taking a fork and knife each, they then dug into the food. They talked quietly while they ate. Soon, there was very little left on the plates.

Then Harry reached for one of the apples. He placed it on a plate and cut it open with a knife.

"Yuck!" he said, moving away from it. The inside of the apple was crawling with worms.

Ginny got the other apple and sliced it open. It too had worms in it.

"So, that's what she meant by 'don't eat the apples'," she muttered under her breath.

"Who said that, Gin?" Harry asked.

"Never mind, Harry," Ginny said, "It isn't important right now. What is important is what you want to do now."

"All right, Gin," Harry said, "How about relaxing right here?" He grinned and leaned back against the tree. Ginny moved beside him and leaned her head on his shoulder. Harry then placed one arm around her and she snuggled against him.

"That was really great food, Harry," Ginny said, *"The only one who can rival my mum in cooking is yours."*

"Yeah, Gin. That's true. I don't know how I'd have turned out without my mum's cooking."

"This had been a really great day, Harry. You've made it really special." She leaned over and started to kiss him.

Harry returned the kiss and deepened it. He wrapped both arms around her, pulling her even closer to him. They stayed under that tree for the rest of the afternoon, alternately talking and snogging.

When they noticed that it was getting dark, they placed the plates and blanket back into the basket and returned to the castle. Harry brought the basket to the owlery to have Hedwig bring it back to Potter Manor then they went to the Great Hall for dinner, which was another feast.

Harry went to bed feeling satisfied and pleased that the day had turned out well. However, the next day wasn't so great.

During divination, Hermione was insulted by Professor Trelawney and left in a huff after knocking aside one of the crystal balls. After the class, Harry found the crystal ball at the bottom steps of the stairs and decided to return it to the classroom. Ron and Neville declined to accompany him.

When Harry got back to the Divination classroom, he placed the crystal ball on one of the tables. As he turned around, he ran into Professor Trelawney who had a strange look on her face. She suddenly grabbed him and said in a hollow voice.

"It will happen tonight. The Dark Lord will return tonight. With the aid of the Vengeful Servant, he rises again, more terrible than before. Beware to the Chosen One for this will allow the False One to return for revenge on him."

Trelawney then coughed and looked at Harry, "Oh, sorry, my boy. Is there anything you want?" she asked.

"Er, no, no," Harry answered, stunned and troubled by what had happened, "Sorry, professor, must get to my next class."

Harry hurried out, pondering what had happened.

"Harry? What was that?" Ginny called to him.

"I don't know, Ginny. It was really strange. I've never seen that happen before."

"Do you want to tell Dumbledore about it?"

"Um, maybe, but not tonight. I want to think about it. Maybe we can tell him tomorrow."

“Well, all right, Harry.” Ginny said, though she seemed a bit reluctant to do so.

Harry didn't answer her but keep wondering what Trelawney had said. What did it mean? Was that a prophecy?

Unfortunately, except for the part about the Dark Lord, which they assumed was Voldemort, Harry couldn't figure it out what Trelawney's words meant.

Who was the Chosen One? Who was the Vengeful Servant? Who was the False One who wanted revenge?

These questions followed Harry to sleep that night.

Chapter 32: A Nightmare that isn't

Disclaimer: I don't own anything you recognize from the books. The rest are mine.

Harry woke up with a start, his scar throbbing. Outside his dorm's window, it was still dark. From the position of the moon, it was probably just after midnight.

He sat up and tried to remember what had awakened him. It was some sort of dream.

He remembered a graveyard. There appeared to be a very large, old house in the distance. Then, his attention focused on a large headstone near the center of the graveyard with a boiling cauldron in front of it. There was a name on the headstone.

Harry wracked his brains trying to remember the name. It began with an R. He lay back and closed his eyes and tried to remember the other letters. As the memory returned, he sat up again, his eyes growing wide. The name of the tombstone was Riddle, Tom Riddle.

The rest of the dream started to come back to him. Two figures had come into the graveyard, both appearing to be men.

One of the men had been carrying someone in his arms. He had placed the person against the headstone then conjured ropes to hold that person in place. It was a woman dressed in a nightgown and clearly unconscious. She had appeared to be middle-aged and broad with a square jaw. She had seemed vaguely familiar to Harry.

The other man had been carrying a small bundle. When that man stepped into the light cast by the fire below the cauldron, his face had become visible. It was Lucius Malfoy.

Malfoy had opened the bundle to reveal a strange deformed creature. It was hairless and scaly-looking, with thin arms and legs and a flat and snake-like face.

Taking the creature in his arms, Malfoy had stepped up to the cauldron and lowered the creature into it.

Malfoy then had said some words that included 'bone of the father' and thrown a long white object into the cauldron.

The other man, who Harry didn't know as his face was always in shadow, had then come up to Malfoy. Malfoy had taken out a large knife from within his robes, said some more words then cut off the other man's hand, throwing it into the cauldron. The other man, his face contorted with pain, had then sunk to his knees.

Finally, Malfoy had approached the woman tied to the headstone. He had cut into her arm and taken some blood in a glass phial. He had then emptied the phial in the cauldron.

The cauldron had then shimmered, sending diamond sparks all over. Then a white smoke had billowed from the cauldron. After a long while, the figure of a man had stepped from the cauldron. As Harry gazed at the man's face, his scar had exploded in pain. The pain had awakened him.

Harry shuddered, remembering the face that he had seen. It had been whiter than a skull, with wide, livid red eyes and a flat nose that had slits for nostrils.

Harry reached out with his mind. He sighed in relief as he felt that Ginny had not been awakened by his dream. *A dream? No, more like a nightmare.*

Knowing that he couldn't go back to sleep without seeing that hideous face, Harry got up and decided to study. He put on a robe and went down to the Common Room with his book on Transfiguration.

After about five minutes, he felt Ginny stir.

"Harry, why are you up" she answered sleepily. Then she sat up, *"What's wrong? You seem uneasy or troubled. Did you have another nightmare? Wait, you did! I can see flashes of it. Oh, Harry, wait there. I'll be down in a moment."*

Bloody Bond. Harry cursed to himself. He'd have to learn how to shield these things from Ginny. He didn't want her to worry. Maybe Dumbledore could help him in that.

Ten minutes later, Ginny came bounding down the stairs from the girls' dormitories. She came over to the couch in front of the fireplace where Harry was seated, staring at the dying embers and sat beside him.

"Harry? Come on," she said, softly, *"Tell me about it. Please?"*

"It's just some silly dream, Ginny,"

"How can it be, if it bothers you like this."

Harry sighed, *"Oh, all right."* He then proceeded to tell her what he could remember of the dream.

After he had told her about it, she wrapped her arms around him and they lapsed into silence, staring at the fireplace together. She sent calming thoughts to him.

Finally, she looked up at him, *"You have to tell Dumbledore, Harry."*

Harry sighed, *"Why, Gin? So, he can see what a twisted imagination I have?"*

She glared at him. *"No, you prat, that was no product of your imagination. You remember Dumbledore said you have a connection with Riddle. You have to let him know what happened."*

He sighed again. *"All right. Let's go and get it over with. I'll just get the cloak so we don't get caught by Filch."*

He pulled her up and she waited while he retrieved his invisibility cloak from his trunk.

They slowly walked hand in hand under the cloak to the gargoyle guarding the staircase to the Headmaster's office. Once there, they remembered that they didn't know the password.

Harry's forehead furrowed, "Okay, it's been some sort of candy. We just have to name as many as we can."

For five minutes, they said the name of every kind of candy they knew. Finally, Ginny said, "Three musketeers?" The gargoyle moved aside.

Harry shook his head, *"It had to be a muggle candy."*

Ginny smiled, *"Well, you know Dumbledore. Come on, let's get this over with. We don't want to be here when the rest of the castle wakes up."*

Harry nodded while folding his cloak and placing it in a pocket. They stepped on the moving stairs that carried them up to the door to Dumbledore's office. Before Harry could knock, they heard the voice of the elderly man.

"Come in, Harry, Ginevra."

Harry shook his head in wonder, *"How does he do that? One of these days I'm finding out."*

"You and me both, Harry. It's just too weird that he knows whoever is in front of his door."

They entered the office and stood before the Headmaster. They noticed that the portraits of the previous headmasters that hung around the office all seemed to be asleep.

"Good evening," Dumbledore said, smiling, "Please, sit down. To what do I owe the honor of this night's visit?"

Once he and Ginny were seated, Harry cleared his throat, "Er, sir, I was awakened earlier by another dream about Voldemort."

"Oh?" Dumbledore said, leaning forward, "what did you see in this 'dream', Harry?"

Harry told Dumbledore as much as he could about the dream. When he had finished, Dumbledore was quiet, leaning back in his chair and his fingers steepled in front of him.

Harry and Ginny watched him for several minutes, exchanging worried glances every minute. Finally, Harry said, "Sir? What happened tonight?"

Dumbledore sighed and looked at Harry, "Harry, remember what I told you last Christmas when you told me about your first dream about Voldemort?"

"Yes, sir," Harry nodded, "that we have a connection through my scar."

"Yes, that," Dumbledore said, "It appears that when Voldemort gets very emotional or excited, you are able to see what he is doing. I don't know why you are seeing it from a separate view rather than from his view, but what matters is that you see what he is doing at that moment."

Harry's eyes widened, "Sir, do, do you mean that what I saw wasn't just a dream, that it was happening."

Dumbledore nodded, a sad look in his eyes, "Yes, Harry. I believe what you saw in your dream were actual events."

Harry's eyes widened even more, "Then, then, that means that..."

"That Voldemort has gotten a new body. He has returned," Dumbledore said, a fierce look in his eyes, something Harry had never seen before.

Harry felt fear and horror course through Ginny, doubling his own. He reached out and pulled her in his arms, trying to comfort her as she started to cry.

"Shh, it'll be all right, Gin. I won't let him hurt you or even get near you."

Ginny sniffed and nodded.

Harry looked up at the Headmaster, "Professor, what was it exactly that I saw happening in the graveyard?"

Dumbledore's face darkened, "That was a dark ritual, Harry. It is a ritual that gives someone like Voldemort a new body or form. It is seldom done because of the requirements needed. What you saw was the sacrifice of the items needed, a bone from the recipient's father, a body part from a faithful follower and blood from an enemy."

"Was that woman I saw an enemy of Voldemort?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore nodded, "Any decent person would be considered an enemy of Voldemort, Harry. But I believe he would choose anyone who had actively fought against him."

"Then he could have chosen me," Harry said, "I was the reason for his downfall. Why didn't he use me?"

"Ah, Harry," Dumbledore said, "It would be difficult for him to get you. You are here right now at Hogwarts. The wards here protect the students. At other times, you are at Potter Manor or the Burrow, which have their own wards protecting these places. So, it would have taken a lot of planning and time if he had wanted to use your blood for the ritual."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He certainly didn't want to be part of that horrific thing. He sure didn't want to see Voldemort in person. Twice was already enough.

"Professor, do you know who the woman was?" Harry asked, "She seemed vaguely familiar."

Dumbledore looked thoughtful and saddened at the same time, "From your description, Harry, I have my suspicions. I would guess that you would have known her. I will need to check with the Ministry. In the meantime, you must not tell anyone else about this, at least until I can determine who he captured for that ritual."

He then looked kindly at the two of them, "I think the both of you should get some rest now. You may go back to Gryffindor Tower."

Harry nodded and pulled Ginny up with him. Their walk back to Gryffindor Tower was even quieter than their walk to Dumbledore's office.

When they were back in the Common Room, Harry guided Ginny towards the stairs to the girls' dormitory, but she stopped him and made him face her.

"Harry?" she said softly to him in his mind as she looked up at him.

"Yes, *Gin?*" he answered, looking down at her, "*what is it, Gin?*"

"Do you mind if we just stay down here in the Common Room? I don't want to be in my bed alone, not after hearing Dumbledore say V-v-voldemort is back."

Harry hesitated for a moment before answering her, having felt apprehension and nervousness coming from her, "*All right, Ginny. Let's go sit on the couch.*"

Harry gently guided her to the couch in front of the fireplace. He sat down and gently pulled her down beside him. Ginny curled up against him and settled her head against his shoulder as he placed his arms around her.

They didn't speak as they sat in each other's arms. They just stared at the dying fire as they tried to get some comfort from each other's presence.

Finally, Harry reached out to her with his mind. "*Relax, Gin. Don't worry. Dumbledore said Hogwarts has loads of wards. We're safe here. He can't get to us.*"

"*It's not that,*" she told him, "*I'm not worried that much about us. I'm worried about my family. They're out there, not knowing he's back. My parents opposed him just as much as yours did. He'll want revenge against all those who fought against him before.*"

"*I know, Gin,*" Harry said, "*I'm worried about my parents, too, especially Mum. Being pregnant will make her less capable of doing magic. I just hope the wards around our homes and the Ministry are strong enough. Well, I'm sure Dumbledore will inform them about this. They'll figure out something.*"

After a few moments, Gin spoke up again in Harry's mind, *"Harry, you forgot to tell Dumbledore about what happened between you and Trelawney."*

"Oh, bugger," Harry said, *"Well, it's too late now. I'll just have to tell him tomorrow."*

They lapsed again into silence. Soon, the slow crackling of the logs on the fire and the comfort they felt from each other's presence lulled the two young lovers to sleep.

After Harry and Ginny had left his office, Dumbledore had remained at his desk contemplating Harry's dream. He was not as sure of Voldemort's return as he had appeared to Harry, but he thought it better to assume that it was true, at least until he had checked it out.

He knew the portraits of the previous headmasters of the school had all been listening when Harry had described his dream. A few had reacted to it with dread and apprehension, though Harry and Ginny had not noticed.

He talked to several of the portraits and they all agreed that it was best to assume Voldemort had really returned. Phineus Nigellus had even suggested he check on Voldemort's last known hiding place. Dumbledore considered doing just that but first he had to inform some people about it as well as confirm his suspicion on the identity of the victim Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy had used for the ritual.

Dumbledore moved to the fireplace set in his office. Throwing in some floo powder, he called out, "Potter Manor master bedroom," then stuck his face into the fire. When his face had settled to the view of the aforementioned bedroom, he saw two people fast asleep on a large bed, one with red hair.

Dumbledore called out softly, "James, James, please wake up."

The man on the bed stirred, slowly sat up and sleepily looked around the room. Seeing Dumbledore's face in the fire, he seemed to wake up instantly. James Potter got out of bed and strode quickly to the fireplace. He bent down on one knee and looked at Dumbledore's image in the fire.

“Albus, what is it?” James said softly so as not to awaken his wife, “It’s the middle of the night. Did something happen to Harry or Rose?” He was getting agitated now.

“James, calm down,” Dumbledore said, “Yes, it has something to do with Harry, but he’s fine right now. I have to talk to you and Lily. May I come over?”

“Of course, Albus,” James said, “You know the wards are adjusted to let you in through the living room fireplace anytime. We’ll see you in there in twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes later, Dumbledore flooded into Potter Manor to meet a worried couple.

As soon as Dumbledore was in the room, Lily stood up and advanced on him.

“Albus, what’s wrong?” Lily said, anxiously, “What happened to Harry?”

“Let’s sit down, Lily,” Dumbledore said, in a kind voice, “and I’ll tell you.”

Once they were seated, Dumbledore told the Potters about Harry’s dreams about Voldemort, especially the second one.

When he had finished, James said, “Why didn’t you tell me the first time he went to you, Albus?” His voice had an indignant tone, “After all, I’m his father.”

Dumbledore sighed, “Forgive me, James. I wanted to investigate it further before telling anyone else. In addition, Harry asked me to keep it a secret for a while. I didn’t want to break his trust in me. However, if he really did see Voldemort regain a body, then it is important for you to know about Harry’s connection with Voldemort.”

James looked to be deep in thought for a minute then he said, “All right, Albus. We’ll forget that for the moment. Now, how do we determine if what Harry dreamed about really came true?”

“Well, the last information I had on Voldemort was that he was hiding in Albania,” Dumbledore said, “I will go there and make sure he is no longer there. I should have gone there the first time Harry said he dreamed of Voldemort, but the affairs of the school came first. Now, you, James, need to find out the identity of his victim for that ritual.”

“Do you have any idea who it was, Albus?” Lily asked.

“From Harry’s description, I have my suspicions, Lily,” Dumbledore said, “I wish I could have had a look at her myself but you know that dreams cannot be viewed in a pensieve. However, James can find out if she is missing.”

“Who do you think it was, Albus,” James said.

When Dumbledore said the name, James paled while Lily gasped.

“Hmm, maybe it was her,” James said, two fingers grasping his chin as he thought about it, “I heard that she sent word by owl that she was ill. Someone should have checked on her,” He frowned then, “If it was her, then it’s a great loss for us. She was a formidable witch.’

Dumbledore looked saddened, “I agree, James. It would be a very great loss. You check on her while I am in Albania. It will take me a few days to determine he is no longer there and to see if he managed to get here. Minerva will be in charge of the school in my absence.”

Dumbledore and the Potter parents talked for a while longer before Dumbledore returned to Hogwarts.

Once the Headmaster was gone, James turned to his wife and was startled to see tears in her eyes. He embraced her and held her as she cried on his shoulder.

“Why, James?” she wailed, “why does it have to be our Harry?”

“I don’t know, Lily,” James said, “I’m just thankful that we are here to help him through this. I don’t know how he would have managed if we weren’t around.”

When Lily had cried herself out, James helped her back to their bedroom. He didn't go back to sleep, however. Instead, James got dressed and prepared to do what Dumbledore had asked him to do. He just hoped Dumbledore was wrong about the identity of the woman Voldemort had used in his ritual.

Chapter 33: A conversation with Rose and Hermione

Disclaimer: I don't own anything you recognize from the books. The rest are my invention.

Harry stirred. He slowly became aware that he wasn't in his bed. He groggily opened his eyes and saw a sea of red in front of his eyes. He smelled a lovely combination of vanilla and roses coming from it. He then became aware of the arms around him and his arms around someone familiar.

He fully opened his eyes and saw he was on the couch in front of the fireplace in the Gryffindor Common Room and Ginny was in his lap, just like that time on New Year's Day at Potter Manor. She still seemed to be asleep. A glance at the clock on the fireplace mantel showed it was already after 6am.

"Ginny," he called gently in her mind, *"Wake up, sweetheart. Come on, before someone sees us like this."*

She stirred a bit but then tightened her arms around him, murmuring, "Five more minures, Mum."

"Okay, Gin," Harry said, softly, as he moved to lift her off his lap, "Come on, it's morning already. We really need to get up before someone finds us."

"Too late, Potter," a voice said behind him, sounding much like McGonagall.

Harry yelped and leaped up, unceremoniously dumping Ginny on the floor. He turned around and was met by laughter.

Standing behind them was Rose, now laughing, Hermione and Ron. The latter's face was red and his eyes were hard points as he looked between Harry and Ginny.

"Harry, you prat," she screamed in his mind, *"why the hell did you do that?"*

"Sorry, Ginny," he said to her as he helped her up, "my prat of a sister made me think it was McGonagall who found us."

"Oh!" she said to him, *"Er, did we fall asleep down here?"* she looked apologetic to him.

"Yup, just like we did at Potter Manor on New's Year's Eve." Harry then turned to Rose, "Hey, don't do that, Rose. Look what happened."

Rose stop laughing but still had a smirk on her face, "Well, I couldn't let the opportunity go to waste. I haven't had a chance to tease you two yet."

"Oh, yeah, Ha, ha," Harry said, as he turned to Ginny, "Meet you back in ten minutes?"

"Make it twenty," Ginny said, "I need a good shower." *"I need to wash away the memories made up by your dream."*

Harry frowned but only said, "Okay, see you." He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and headed for the boys' stairs. He barely registered the calculating look on Hermione's face.

Ginny headed for the girls' stairs, trailed by Rose.

When Harry got out of the boys' bathroom, he found Ron waiting for him in the bedroom. Their other roommates had already left.

Harry started to dress, ignoring Ron who was watching him intently. Finally, as he was tying his shoes, Harry had had enough of Ron's staring.

"All right, Ron," Harry said, "what is it? If it's about me and Ginny being together in the Common Room all night, nothing happened beyond sleeping side by side, okay?"

Ron looked at him critically, "Are you sure, Harry?"

"Yes!" Harry said, forcefully, "Look, Ron, I'm not ready for more than snogging. **We're** not ready for more than that. We've agreed that we're too young for more. So, don't worry. We're taking it slow."

"All right," Ron said, still looking a little skeptical, "But why did you two end up in the Common Room together?"

Harry hesitated slightly, wondering how to answer Ron.

"Harry, just tell him you had a nightmare and I came down to comfort you."

"Why do I get to have the nightmare?"

"Just tell him, will you? It's close enough to the truth. Hurry up! I'm starving."

"Harry?" Ron said, "what is it? You seemed to space out for a moment."

"Sorry, Ron," Harry said, "It's just that it's, er, a bit embarrassing to admit. I had a nightmare last night and came down to the Common Room to relax. Ginny must have sensed it and came down to comfort me. At least that's what she said. Anyway, we were so relaxed that we fell asleep."

"All right," Ron said, smiling as he placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, "Well, don't worry. I won't tell anyone that you needed to hold your girlfriend's hand after having a nightmare."

Harry frowned, "Uh, yeah, thanks." He could hear Ginny laughing in his mind. *"Be kind, Gin."*

Ginny giggled in his mind, *"All right, Harry. You better not let the twins hear that. I'm ready. Let's get some breakfast."*

When they entered for breakfast, Harry noticed that Dumbledore was not at the Head Table. He frowned and wondered why the Headmaster was not there.

"Maybe he's gone to find out who the woman was, Harry," Ginny said to him mentally.

“Maybe, Gin,” Harry said back, “I just wish he had told us beforehand. Now, we’ll have to wait for him to come back before we can tell anyone what Trelawney said.”

Near the end of breakfast, Harry saw an owl fly over to McGonagall. She read the note the owl had delivered. Harry saw her lips tighten to a thin line then she leaned over to Professor Sprout and talked to her.

The portly Herbology professor became a bit distressed after her conversation with the Assistant Headmistress. Professor Sprout came down to the Hufflepuff table and spoke to one of her students, a girl in Harry’s year who had her hair in a long plait. The girl had tears running down her face after that and almost ran out of the Great Hall.

“Wonder what that was about,” Ron said, “It looked like bad news.” He turned to Harry, “Harry, do you remember who she is?”

“Oh, honestly, Ron,” Hermione said, “she’s been taking some classes with us since we started here. That was Susan Bones.”

“I know Susan,” Neville said. He turned to Harry, “You should know her too, Harry. Her aunt is Madam Amelia Bones, head of Magical Law Enforcement.”

“Oh! She’s Dad’s boss, then,” Harry said, then he looked at Neville, “She’s our Dads’ boss.”

Neville nodded, “I heard Susan’s been under her care since You-Know-Who killed her entire family. In fact, Madam Bones is Susan’s only family.”

Harry looked sharply at Ginny, *“Ginny, you don’t think.....”*

“....that the woman in the graveyard was Madam Bones?” Ginny asked.

“I recognize her now,” Harry said, “I met Madam Bones once when I was nine, You remember the Ministry picnic your Dad organized at that park in Devonshire four years ago?”

"How could I forget that, Harry?" Ginny said, a blush forming on her face, "that was actually the first time you kissed me. Maybe that's when I first fell in love with you."

"Yeah, well," Harry said, looking down as he blushed himself, "it was just on the cheek and that was on a dare from Fred and George. Anyway, Dad introduced Rose and me to her then. She was actually the first Ministry official who didn't fawn over me as the Boy-who-lived. I liked her. Merlin! I hope it wasn't her."

"Calm down, Harry," Ginny said, "We'll find out when Dumbledore gets back."

"Yeah, I guess," Harry said, "I hope it's soon." He turned fully to her, "It's time to head for class. I'll see you at lunch."

Ginny smiled and nodded, "See you, Harry." She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and moved off with Rose and Colin.

Harry went off to join Hermione, Ron and Neville and head for DADA. At the end of the class, Harry busied himself fixing his bookbag, waiting for the classroom to empty. He whispered to his friends to go on to the Great Hall and he'd see them there. He then went up to Remus.

"Remus?" he asked the professor.

Remus looked up from the papers he was reading, "Harry! What can I do for you?"

"Um, I noticed Dumbledore wasn't at breakfast today," Harry said, "Do you know where he is?"

Remus frowned, "I'm sorry, Harry, I don't. Minerva simply told us this morning that Professor Dumbledore would be gone for a few days and she would be in charge in the meantime. Was there something you needed from him? Maybe I can help."

"Er, not really, Remus," Harry said, stammering a bit, "I guess it can wait till he comes back."

He hurriedly left and went to the Great Hall. When he got there, he immediately sought out Ginny. She was sitting already at the Gryffindor table but stood up when he appeared at the doors.

When Harry sat down, Ginny took his hand and held it, sending soothing words through their mental link to calm his agitated state. They ate a quiet lunch together.

Harry's other friends noticed this but didn't say anything, not even Ron.

Later, at the end of their class in Ancient Runes, Hermione managed to corner Harry as they walked out of the classroom.

"Harry, what's going on between you and Ginny?" Hermione asked him, in a whisper

"What?" Harry said, a smirk on his face, "I thought you figured it out already. After all, you practically told off Ron. We're dating."

Hermione glared at him, "It's more than that, Harry. I see you and Ginny simply staring at each other, yet your faces show all sorts of emotions."

"Really, Hermione," Harry said, quickening his pace, "what can that mean?"

"Well, that's what I see," Hermione said, "wait a minute." She stopped a moment then ran to catch up with Harry, "Are you two talking to each other in your heads, like some sort of telepathy?"

"Oh, come on, Hermione," Harry said, "how would we be able to do that?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, "but it would explain everything. That's it, isn't it? Come on, Harry. You and Ginny can trust me."

"Ginny? Are you hearing this?" Harry asked her.

"Yes, Harry," she replied, "*Every last bit of it.*"

"So, what do you think?" Harry asked, "Should we tell her?"

"I think we should, Harry." Ginny replied, "She can help us research this Bond thing. We haven't heard anything more from Dumbledore about it. Um, I also think we should tell Rose everything."

Harry groaned, *"Ginny! Why?"*

"HARRY JAMES POTTER! She's your sister! She already knows we can feel each other's emotions. She might as well know it all. Besides, she can help Hermione with the research about the Bond."

"All right, all right," Harry said, shaking his head, "Just don't yell in my mind like that. We can tell Rose, too. Um, what about Ron?"

"Hmm, why don't we see how it goes with Hermione and Rose before we go bringing my overprotective brother into this. Where do we meet you?"

"Um, there's a secret passage to Hogsmeade on the third floor, behind this painting of a mother holding a baby. The password is 'little peggy'."

"All right, Harry. See you in a bit."

"You're talking to her in your mind again, aren't you?" Hermione asked him just then.

"Uh, yeah," Harry said sheepishly, "I had to ask her if she wants you to know what we're doing. Since she's part of this, I needed to get her permission."

"Ok, Harry," Hermione said, "That makes sense, I guess. So, can you tell me?"

Harry looked around, making sure there was no one else around. "Yeah, but not here. Ginny also has to be there. Come on." He led her down the corridor and up a couple of staircases.

Once they reached the portrait Harry had told Ginny about, Hermione looked at him with a questioning look.

Harry held up his hand, "Wait a minute." He walked up to the portrait and whispered the password. The woman in the portrait bowed to him and slid it aside. The opening led into a storeroom of sorts that narrowed at the other end and continued on into the darkness.

Harry smirked at Hermione's gobsmacked face. He went in and lit his wand.

"What is this place, Harry?" she asked, as she followed him in. The opening closed after her.

"It's one of the secret passages to Hogsmeade my Dad and Sirius told me about before I came to Hogwarts," Harry replied, "It also makes a good meeting place as no one else knows about it or the password to open the portrait.

Just then, the portrait slid aside again. Hermione tensed for a moment before Ginny peeked in. The youngest Weasley entered the secret room followed by Rose Potter.

Once they were all settled on some old boxes that they dusted off with a good scourgify spell, Hermione looked expectantly at Harry.

Harry sighed and looked at Ginny.

"Oh, no," Ginny said to him, *"you're the one she asked, you be the one to tell her and Rose."*

Harry sighed again, "All right. Hermione, you're right. Ginny and I can talk to each other in our minds.'

"I knew it," Hermione declared, then started bombarding Harry and Ginny with questions in a rapid succession.

Harry laughed, "Slow down, Hermione. I'll start at the beginning. Some of this Rose already knows as we both talked to her about it separately. You see, it all started after I rescued Ginny from the Chamber...." Harry then proceeded to tell them everything, including their conversation with Dumbledore, but he still left out his dreams about Voldemort and Dumbledore's speculations about his having

connection with Voldemort through his scar. He pointedly ignored Ginny's question on that.

Once Harry was done, Hermione looked thoughtful for a few seconds then she said, "A soul bond, huh? Hmm, we need to find out everything known about that. It's good you included Rose in this. She can help me with the research. Right, Rose? Rose?"

The three of them looked at Rose who had a stunned expression on her face. She only snapped out of it when Ginny shook her.

"Wow!" Rose said, "I thought what you were doing was great, but as part of a soul bond? That's so cool!" She was grinning now, "So, that means you're both really destined to be together forever, right?"

"Yeah," Harry said, "According to Dumbledore, pretty much."

"Ooh, wait till Mum and Mrs. Weasley hear about this," Rose said, her eyes twinkling with mischief, "they'll be planning the wedding."

Harry's eyes widened, "Don't you dare, sis! We're not even finished with school yet!" He could feel Ginny's amusement. *"Don't you start, Gin."*

"Why didn't you tell them about your dreams with Voldemort, Harry?"

"I didn't want to shock them all at once, Ginny. I'll tell them now." He looked at Hermione and Rose, "Okay, there is something else."

Hermione raised one eyebrow but didn't comment.

Harry drew a deep breath and told them about his two dreams about Voldemort and Dumbledore's speculations.

At the end, both girls were wide-eyed. Then Rose rushed forward to embrace Harry, her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Harry," Rose said, her voice muffled as she was pressed against Harry's chest, "Why can't that bloody bastard leave you alone?"

"Hey," Harry said, returning her embrace, "It'll be all right."

“But, Harry,” Hermione said, tears in her own eyes, “if Dumbledore is right, then he’s come back. He could try to kill you again.”

They all lapsed into silence at those words. Harry continued to hold on to his sister.

“Well, with Dumbledore here, there’s no way he’d try,” Ginny finally said. *“He better not try. I’ve got you now, Potter and there’s no way I’m letting Tom take you away. I’ll bat-bogey hex him into the next century.”*

“Thanks, Gin. Remember what I told you the other night, I’m not letting him get you either.”

“Okay, that’s it,” Rose said, as she pulled away from Harry and stood up, “Hermione, they’re talking to each other mentally again.”

“Hmm,” Hermione said, “we’ll have to look up this ‘soul bond’ thing as soon as possible.”

“Well, you two can do that,” Ginny said as she grabbed Harry’s hand and headed for the entrance, “As for me, I’m hungry and I want my boyfriend beside me while I eat.”

When the four arrived at the Great Hall and sat down at the Gryffindor table, Ron looked up from his plate, “Hey, what took you guys so long? I’ve been saving your places for over a half-hour!”

“Sorry, Ron,” Harry said, “Hermione wanted to ask Professor Vector some questions after class, so I waited for her. Then the moving staircases got us into the wrong corridor.”

“Well, okay,” Ron said then he went back to eating.

Harry heard Ginny giggle in his mind.

“That’s Ron for you. You can’t take his mind from his food for too long.”

“Yeah, I know that.” Harry told her, smirking, *“I was counting on it so he’d swallow the lame story I gave him.”* They then started on their own dinner.

Chapter 34: Bad news

Disclaimer: I don't own anything you recognize from the books. The rest are my invention.

A week later, Harry, Ginny, Rose and Hermione were studying in the Common Room after dinner when McGonagall came in through the portrait and came up to their group.

"Mr. Potter, I would like you and Miss Potter to please accompany me to the Headmaster's office, right now."

Harry and Rose looked at each other, apprehension and curiosity warring in their minds.

"Harry, you and Rose haven't done any pranking without us, have you?"

"No, Gin. You know that. There's no way I could have done anything without you knowing about it."

"Professor," Harry said as he got up, "what is this about?"

"You'll find out when you get there, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said, her mouth a thin line which increased Harry's apprehension.

"Um, okay, professor," Harry said, "Can Ginny come with us?"

"Under the circumstances I suppose she may," McGonagall said, "I'm sure she'll know what it's about as soon as you do anyway." There was a twinkle in her eye for a moment, just like Dumbledore had.

Harry, Ginny and Rose followed McGonagall down the corridors of the castle, Harry and Ginny tightly clasping the other's hand.

"Harry?" Ginny said, *"do you have any idea what's going on?"*

"No, Gin," Harry said, *"like you, I'm in the dark here."*

When McGonagall ushered them into Dumbledore's office, they saw that there were other people in the office besides the Headmaster – Remus, Sirius and....

“Dad!” Harry cried. Ginny was also surprised to see James in the office. They both noticed that Rose wasn’t as surprised they were.

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked, dropping Ginny’s hand and moving forward to hug his father then he stopped short when he saw the grave expression on James’ face, “What’s wrong? Is it...Mum?” Harry’s heart was pounding now.

Ginny grabbed Harry’s hand again and gave it a squeeze.

“No, no,” James said, “She’s fine.” A sad smile formed on his face now, “She’s a bit hormonal now, but she’s okay.” He didn’t comment on seeing Ginny with his children.

“Then why are you and Sirius here?” Harry asked.

James ran his hand through his hair, a habit Harry shared. “We came to warn you and Rose, Harry.”

“Warn us?” Harry asked, his eyes narrowing, “about what, Dad?”

Sirius spoke up for him, “Wormtail escaped from Azkaban yesterday. We’re afraid he may come here for you, Harry.”

“Me?” Harry said, surprised, “Why?”

“Probably he wants revenge for what happened to him,” James said, “since he can’t get to me and Sirius, he may try to get you, or Rose.”

Harry noticed the short pause before his father added Rose’s name but he didn’t say anything.

“Wait a minute, Dad,” Harry said, “How’d he got out of Azkaban? I thought no one’s ever escaped before. I once heard you say that that was why the dementors were there.”

“The dementors have left Azkaban, haven’t they?” Rose said suddenly.

James and Sirius looked at her with surprise.

“How the hell did you figure that out?” Sirius blurted out. He turned to Dumbledore and McGonagall with a sheepish look, “Sorry, professors.” Then he turned back to Rose, “How’d you find out?” Sirius then turned to James who was now glaring at him, “Whoops, sorry, Prongs, sir.”

“Is that true, Dad, Sirius?” Harry asked, “Have the dementors left Azkaban?”

When both men didn’t answer him, Harry said, “They have, haven’t they? I bet they’ve gone to join Voldemort.”

“They most likely have, Harry,” Dumbledore said, sadly, “I’ve warned the Ministry before about using them. They are foul creatures whose only desire is to suck all the happiness from their victims and to feed on their souls. They have served every so-called Dark lord. It was only a matter of time before they joined Voldemort.”

“And without the dementors around to weaken his will, Wormtail was able to assume his animagus form,” James said, wearily, “It’s very hard to catch a rat.”

“What about the rest of Voldemort’s followers who are in Azkaban?” Harry asked.

“Well, they’re still there,” Sirius said, “Your father had to assign a third of the aurors to augment the guards there.” Then he muttered, “And that new department head isn’t helping much.”

“Harry, I think you should tell Dumbledore what Professor Trelawney said to you.”

“Oh, all right, Gin.”

“Professor,” Harry said, looking at Dumbledore, “there’s something I forgot to tell you before. The day after Valentine’s Day, something strange happened after Divination.”

Harry then told Dumbledore about the strange pronouncement given by Trelawney.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said, “If you don’t mind, I’d like to make a recording of that from your memory.”

“Okay, I guess, professor,” Harry said, “How will you do that?”

“I’ll simply extract the memory from your mind with my wand and place it in my pensieve,” Dumbledore said, “don’t worry. It won’t hurt. Do you know what a pensieve is?” He directed the question to the three children.

“Um, I think it’s a magical device, sort of a shallow basin, used to hold memories,” Rose answered, “Isn’t it a rare object, Professor?”

“Very good, Miss Potter,” Dumbledore said, smiling, “10 points to Gryffindor. Yes, you are right on all counts. It is a rare device used to hold memories. I have one, given to me as a birthday gift many, many years ago. I use it on occasion to clear my mind when the memories clutter it up, a problem with one my age, I’m afraid. Now, let me just get it.”

Dumbledore went up to a black cabinet standing in the back of his office. He opened the cabinet and brought out a shallow stone basin carved with runes around the edges. He set it up on his desk and activated it with his wand.

Harry, Ginny and Rose stared with fascination at the pensieve as it emitted a bright silvery light. Its surface became ruffled like water beneath wind and then swirled like clouds in the sky.

“Now, Harry,” Dumbledore said, “Please come over beside me. All you have to do is to think of what Trelawney had said that day. Tell me when you have the memory and I will extract it.”

Harry walked up to Dumbledore. He concentrated for a few seconds then said, “All right, sir. I have it in my mind.”

“All right, Harry. Just hold still for a while.” Dumbledore placed his wand against Harry’s temple then started to pull out a silvery gossamer-fine strand from Harry’s forehead. Once he had it all, Dumbledore dropped it in the pensieve.

“Now that we have it here,” Dumbledore said, “Let’s see the whole thing.” He prodded the silvery substance with his wand’s tip.

The head and upper shoulders of Professor Trelawney appeared above the pensieve. She said the same thing Harry had heard that day.

“It will happen tonight. The Dark Lord will return tonight. With the aid of the Vengeful Servant, he rises again, more terrible than before. Beware to the Chosen One for this will allow the False One to return for revenge on him.”

“Harry,” James said, once the memory had faded, “why didn’t you tell the headmaster about this before?”

“I forgot, Dad,” Harry said, “Some other stuff was going on at that time.”

“Yeah, I know,” James muttered.

“Just what was that, professor?” Rose asked.

“I’m afraid it may have been a prediction of some sort,” Dumbledore said, “After all, it came from your Divination professor.”

Harry’s eyes bulged, “You mean she’s not a fake?”

“Mr. Potter!” McGonagall said, “Please have some respect for your professor.”

“Sorry, professor,” Harry said. He did notice that neither McGonagall nor Dumbledore refuted his statement. McGonagall even seemed to have a slight smirk on her face.

“Do you know what it could mean, professor?” Ginny asked.

“Well, Miss Weasley,” Dumbledore said, softly, “It is obvious that the Dark Lord is Voldemort. As to the identities of the others, I have some idea, but for now, I will need some time to check them.”

Something then clicked in Harry's mind. "Wait a minute, Dad," Harry said, "you weren't surprised when I said the dementors have probably gone to join Voldemort. That means you think Voldemort may be back. You'd only think that if you know about my dreams." He turned to Dumbledore, "You told him!"

"Yes, Harry," Dumbledore said, "I told your father about your dreams. I needed someone to know that Voldemort may be back, who better than your father? I assume he told Sirius and Remus."

"He only told us last night about them, Harry," Remus said, "I haven't had the chance to talk to you about them."

"Well, all right," Harry said, "Now, my father and his friends know how much of a freak I am." He felt a slap against the back of his head. Turning around, he saw Ginny standing there, glaring at him.

"Stop it, Harry! Can't you see they haven't said anything about that? If they had thought you were a freak, they wouldn't be here now warning you about Wormtail. Even with those dreams, they still care about you, just like me. So stop with the 'feeling sorry for myself' act."

Stunned by that, Harry just looked at Ginny for a few seconds, then sighed. He turned around to find the other people in the room looking at them with different expressions. Dumbledore gazed serenely at them, with his usual twinkle in his eye. McGonagall looked stern but had a slight upturn of her mouth. His father and his friends were looking speculatively at him. Rose had a hand covering her mouth, as if she was trying to keep from laughing.

"Er, Headmaster," he said to Dumbledore, "was my dream real? Is Voldemort really back?"

Dumbledore's expression became a dark one, "I'm afraid that may be so, Harry. As you know, I was absent this whole week. I was looking in all of Voldemort's usual haunts and could not find him. The disappearance of the dementors from Azkaban only confirms his reemergence. Only someone as evil and powerful as Voldemort could call them away."

"Well, no one in the Ministry will believe it," James said bitterly, 'especially that cow Fudge placed as head of my department."

"Dad?" Harry asked, slowly, "I thought Madam Bones was head of your department."

James and Sirius exchanged grave expressions.

"She's disappeared, Harry," James said, "She sent an owl a few days ago saying she was going on sick leave. I checked her place out the morning after Professor Dumbledore told us about your dream. There was no sign of her. No one's seen her since." He took on this pained expression, "In the meantime, Fudge placed his Deputy Minister, Dolores Umbridge in charge of the department."

"Stupid bitch," Sirius muttered.

"Sirius!" McGonagall said, "Watch your language in front of the children!"

Sirius looked at her with an apologetic look, "Sorry, Minerva, but that woman is a real pain."

Harry noticed that the professor didn't say anything about that. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up and stared at the hazel eyes of his father, looking down on him with concern and love.

"Harry, I can't begin to understand what dreaming about Voldemort is like, but it doesn't change how much I and your mother love you. We wish you didn't have to go through that. But remember, we will always be here for you."

Harry felt a surge of relief over this show of support by his father.

"Hug him, you prat!" Ginny told him.

Harry moved forward and embraced his father tightly, "Thanks, Dad."

James hugged him back, "No thanks are needed, Harry." He released Harry from his embrace but kept his arms around his son's shoulders, "Now, because Peter is on the loose, you're going to have to be

careful. I don't want you to go to Hogsmeade. I don't want you to be alone." He looked at Ginny, "Well, I guess that won't be a problem. Just stay with your friends wherever you go."

James beckoned Rose over. He placed one arm around her when she came up to them, "Sweetie," he said, looking down at her, "I don't want you to go anywhere alone, either. It's a good thing you and Ginny share your classes and dorm. You just stay out of trouble, okay?"

"Sure, Dad," Rose said.

"Oh, I'm sorry to have to say this," James said, an apologetic look on his face, "but that means no pranking either."

"DAD!" Harry cried, in protest. Then he looked at the three professors in the office and noticed they seemed to have gone deaf and blind for the moment.

"I mean it, Harry," James said. He turned to his friends who had started snickering, "Padfoot, Moony, stop that! This is serious." He returned his gaze to Harry, "I have an idea how and when you do your pranking, son, so, as much as I hate it, you'll have to lay off the pranking for now."

Harry sighed, "All right, Dad. We'll do it for now." He thought he heard McGonagall breath a sigh of relief.

"All right, you three," Remus said, "It's getting late. I'll take you back to the Common Room."

"Thanks, Moony," James said. He drew his children into another hug, and then pulled Ginny in, too. "All right, take care, all of you. Ginny, keep my children out of trouble, especially Harry."

Ginny grinned, ignoring the glare Harry gave her and his father, "Of course, Mr. Potter, I will."

"Thanks. Oh, you can call me James," James said, "After all, you're going to be my daughter-in-law. Of course, not for a few more years, I hope."

Ginny blushed furiously, "Er, thanks, um, James." *"Cut it out, Harry!"*

Harry had been laughing at her in his mind. He sobered up quickly when she yelled into his mind.

Harry and Rose said their goodbyes to James and Sirius and to Dumbledore and McGonagall. The three kids followed Remus back to the Gryffindor Tower. Remus said good night and left them at the Portrait.

As soon as they stepped through the Portrait, they found Ron, Neville and Hermione waiting for them at their usual place in front of the fireplace.

"So, what was that about?" Ron asked, "What did Dumbledore want?"

Harry exchanged glances with Rose and Ginny, "My Dad and Sirius were here. They wanted to warn us that Peter Pettigrew's escaped from Azkaban."

Ron, Neville and Hermione's eyes widened.

"But why did they want to warn you?" Ron asked.

"Ron, isn't it obvious?" Hermione said, "Pettigrew betrayed their family to V-voldemort. Because of that, he was sent to Azkaban. He'd blame them for that and now wants revenge."

"That's right, Hermione," Rose said, "That's exactly what Dad said."

"How would he get in here, anyway?" Neville asked, "Hogwarts has loads of wards protecting it. You can't apparate in or floo in without Dumbledore knowing."

"Harry, don't you think we should tell them that Pettigrew's an animagus? They're our friends. Knowing that would help them keep an eye out for him."

"Um, all right, Gin. But I don't want them to know yet that my Dad and Sirius are animagi, too."

"All right, Harry."

"Well, the thing is Pettigrew is an animagus," Harry said.

The other three gasped.

"Wow," Neville said, "What's his form?"

"A rat," Rose said, "Appropriate, wasn't it?"

Ron snorted, "Yeah, a real stinker." He turned to Harry, "so, I guess your Dad warned you not to be alone anywhere here."

"Yeah," Harry frowned, leaning back in his seat, "He even warned us not to go pranking as that's the time we're usually alone."

"But, you'll be under the invisibility cloak," Ron said, "Surely, that will keep you hidden."

"I don't know, Ron," Hermione said, "I doubt Harry's Dad would have told him to stop pranking if he thought the cloak would keep him safe from Pettigrew. After all, he gave Harry the cloak."

Harry frowned again, "That's what I figured, Hermione. So, I guess for now the Slytherins are safe. We'll just have to be together wherever we go."

"Even the loo, Harry?" Rose asked, smirking.

"Well," Harry said, blushing, "er, I know you girls go together there. I guess Ron or Neville can go with me whenever I need to go, except when I need to shower."

"One thing's for sure, Harry," Rose said, grinning, "You and Ginny can't have any more 'alone time'. You'd both be too distracted to defend yourself."

Harry and Ginny both blushed as the others laughed.

Chapter 35: A visit to St. Mungo's

The days passed quickly. The group celebrated Ron's 14th birthday on the first day of March with a party after dinner. The twins managed to get an inordinate amount of food and drink for the occasion.

Hermione and Rose combined their money to give Ron a pair of Quidditch keeper gloves with his name stitched on it. Neville and Ti gave Ron a load of chocolate and candy from Honeyduke's. Harry and Ginny got him a book on Wizard chess strategy, which he ended up reading until dawn the next day, causing him to miss their morning workout, much to their amusement.

A party was held for Remus Lupin on the DADA professor's own birthday on the 10th of March. Aside from Harry and his friends, Sirius, Harry's parents and the other teachers of Hogwarts were there. Even Snape had come, in spite of his obvious dislike for the birthday celebrant. Of course, he kept to himself most of the evening, though Harry noticed the Potions professor was often scratching his right forearm.

James and Lily were happy to help their friend celebrate another birthday. The chance to see their children, even on a school night was a great bonus.

Harry asked his father for news about Pettigrew, but there was nothing new. James, however, had more disturbing news.

It seemed the dementors had returned to their posts at Azkaban a few days after leaving. The Ministry had not tried to question the creatures as to why they had left and why they had returned. In fact, Fudge and Umbridge had allowed them to continue on with their duties at the wizarding prison.

Harry shook his head at the stupidity of the Ministry's head. He did wonder why Voldemort had allowed the dementors to return to Ministry control.

"Harry." He heard Ginny call in his mind, *"Don't think about that for now. Just enjoy the evening."*

Harry smiled as he gazed at his girlfriend smiling back at him as she was talking with Rose, "*All right, Gin.*" He turned to talk to Sirius about the Quidditch League.

In the second weekend of March, Ravenclaw beat Slytherin in a game where skillful flying overcame blatant attempts of cheating. Since both Slytherin and Ravenclaw had won against Hufflepuff already, this made Ravenclaw the team Gryffindor needed to beat for the Quidditch Cup in the final game set in April.

Oliver Wood scheduled more practices for the Gryffindor team, tiring out Harry and the twins so thoroughly that they couldn't make the morning workouts any longer.

The Gryffindor team was coming back from a particularly grueling practice Saturday afternoon when McGonagall came upon them. She looked critically at their muddy and worn out appearance but didn't comment.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall said, "I have important news for you, hopefully, good news."

"What is it, Professor?" Harry said, a bit apprehensive.

"Your mother has gone into labour," McGonagall said, a slight smile forming on her face, "Your father just floo called. He's bringing her to St. Mungo's."

"What!" Harry said, his eyes going wide, "Dad said she was due in April."

"Well, I believe that twins have a tendency to be early," McGonagall said, "Now, Professor Dumbledore has given you and your sister permission to be with your parents until Sunday evening. Hopefully, the babies will be born by then. Go get cleaned up. Rose will await you in the Headmaster's office. The password is 'Hershey bar'."

"Yes, professor," Harry said, a bit dazed now.

"Harry, that's so wonderful." Ginny said to him in his mind, as he hurried to Gryffindor Tower and the boy's dormitory, "You're going to be there when your brother and sister are born."

"Thanks, Gin," Harry said, "I wish you could come with me, but you won't be a legal part of this family for a few more years. Now, please tune me out. I need to take a shower and I don't want you to repeat what happened two days ago."

Ginny blushed in her mind as she remembered what he was alluding to. She had gone to breakfast early that day. She had tried to call Harry mentally to hurry up and accidentally saw through Harry's eyes while he was standing in front of a mirror fresh from taking a shower. The glimpse she got of Harry's developing body had caused her to drop a pitcher of pumpkin juice and spill it all over herself.

The reactions of their circle of friends weren't something she wanted to repeat, either. Harry had also blushed when he realized what she had done. Hermione and Rose had both raised eyebrows in amusement as they had known that she was talking with Harry. Ron, Neville and Ti had confused looks on their faces while the twins had grinned at her while wondering why she was blushing after getting covered in pumpkin juice.

Harry showered and dressed quickly. After placing some clothes and books in a bag, He hurried to Dumbledore's office. He gave the password to the blocking gargoyle and stepped on the moving stairs. When he entered the office, he found Remus waiting with Rose. Rose had a bag over her shoulder, also filled with clothes and books.

"Hey, Remus," Harry said, "Are you coming with us?"

"Yes, Harry," Remus said, "You know I wouldn't miss the birth of a Potter child. I was there for yours and Rose's, you know."

Harry and Rose smiled. The three floored over to St. Mungo's. As soon as they arrived, Remus went over to the reception desk.

"May I help you?" the witch at the desk asked.

“Yes,” Remus said, “I’d like to know the room of Lily Potter. She’s giving birth.”

“Oh, yes,” the witch said, “She’s on the fifth floor, in a private room in the Amanda Manners Ward, next to the Hospital Shop.”

Remus thanked the reception witch and led Harry and Rose to the lift. They quickly found Lily’s room.

“Mum!” Rose and Harry cried together as soon as they entered the room. Lily was sitting up on the bed, James seated beside her.

Lily smiled, “Hello, my darlings,” holding her arms out to them then drawing them into an embrace. Harry and Rose gingerly avoided her swollen belly.

“Hey, kids,” James said, grinning. He hugged both of them and ruffled Harry’s hair.

Then he turned to Remus, “Hey, Moony, it’s great to see you. I’m glad you could escort my wayward kids and be here with us.”

Remus laughed, “You know I wouldn’t miss this, Prongs.”

“I know,” James said then he looked at his watch, “I know Sirius wouldn’t either, but he is running late. Ah well, come on, kids, Remus, take a seat.”

“So,” Harry said, once they were all seated, “how are you doing, Mum?”

“It’s just like when you and Rose were born,” Lily said, “I doubt you care for the details.” She looked critically at Harry, “Now, son, I know you and Ginny are a couple now. I hope she doesn’t have to come here like me for several years.”

Harry blushed, “Mum! Come on, we’re not doing anything more than kissing. We realize we’re too young for anything else.”

"Well, you both haven't reached the peak of puberty yet. I just hope you don't let your hormones get the better of you. I don't want to become a grandmother when I'm still a new mother."

Harry turned even redder, "Don't worry, Mum. We'll restrain ourselves." He could feel Ginny turn as red as him.

Harry knew by what he was seeing through her eyes that she was lying on her bed in her dormitory, reading her Charms textbook.

"Harry, you know it's scary how much like my Mum yours can get."

"You said it, Gin. I guess it has to do with being a redhead."

"What does that mean, Potter? Wait till I tell Rose about that remark. We'll show you what redheads can do."

Harry gulped. *"No, no, no! I just meant that redheads can be so passionate."*

"Nice save, Harry. Now, I'd like to show you how passionate I can get when you get back."

"Now that is something I'd look forward to. Of course, we can't go forward too much, Gin."

Ginny giggled, *"I know, Harry. I just like to tease you. Don't worry, I don't want my Mum or yours to think I'm a scarlet woman."* Just then, they both felt her stomach grumble. Ginny frowned. *"Well, I think I'll go get some dinner. I wish you were here with me right now."*

"I know, Gin. I wish you were here with us. I just hope my new siblings come soon. I'll see you when we get back. Just be careful."

"All right, Harry. I'll see you. At least, I can get some homework done without any distractions."

"Yeah, I know. I brought some books, too. It may be a long wait. See you, Gin. I love you."

Harry felt her happiness over his words, *"I love you, too, Harry. See you soon."*

Harry turned his attention back to the room he was in. Luckily, his parents and Remus didn't seem to have noticed his interlude with Ginny. Rose, however, did and she just gave him a knowing smirk.

Then, Lily suddenly grimaced as she held her bulging stomach.

James rushed forward to hold her hand, "Another contraction, honey?"

Lily nodded mutely as she rode out the pain. Once it had passed, she said, "They're getting closer and closer."

Just then, a pretty blonde woman came in dressed in the orange robes of a healer. She had a kindly smile on her face, "Lily, James, it's so good to see you again, though it's been years. I never thought to see you again for a delivery." She moved to hug the two Potter adults.

James smiled as he drew back from her, "It's so good to see you, too, Sam. Are you still single?"

She nodded, a blush forming on her face.

James turned to his children, "Kids, this is Samantha Turgis. She's the healer who delivered the two of you, years ago. She was barely out of healer training then. She was in Ravenclaw in Hogwarts, two years behind us."

"Yes, that's right," Sam said, smiling, "You remembered. I was quite grateful that you trusted me back then to deliver your children, even when you were in hiding."

Harry and Rose looked at each other. They had never known who had delivered them, especially Rose, who had been born in the safehouse in Godric's Hollow.

Sam turned to Remus, "Hello, Remus, nice to see you again."

“Hello, Sam,” Remus said, shaking her hand, “It’s good to see you, too.”

“She looks a bit like Madame Pomfrey, doesn’t she?” Rose whispered to Harry.

“Are you talking about Madame Pomfrey, the Hogwarts nurse, dear?” Sam asked, having heard Rose’s comment.

Rose turned red as she nodded.

“She’s the sister of my mum,” Sam replied, “In fact, she was the one who encouraged me to take up the profession.”

Lily gasped and her face screwed up in apparent pain.

“Oh dear,” Sam said, “those contractions are coming more often. I’ll need to examine you.” She arranged Lily and drew the curtains around her bed.

After a few minutes, Sam emerged from the curtains, “She’s fully dilated, James. We need to get her to the delivery room. You can come with us.”

Sam stepped out of the room and returned a moment later with a gurney. She carefully levitated Lily onto it and arranged the sheets over her.

Just then, Sirius burst into the room, “Have I missed it?” He saw Lily on the gurney, “Oh, thank Merlin I haven’t.”

“You almost did, Sirius,” Sam said then, her voice suddenly hard.

Sirius then noticed her, “Er, hi, Sam. Long time, no see.” He had a sheepish look on his face.

Sam glared at him then turned to James, “I see you’re still friends with that one. Well, I won’t hold it against you. We better get going or Lily might give birth here.”

Sam guided the gurney with her wand out the door. James graced Sirius with a smirk then followed her.

All the while, Harry, Rose and Remus had watched the scene with interest and amusement.

Finally, Rose asked, "You dated her, didn't you, Sirius?"

Sirius turned to her, a sheepish grin on his face, "Yep, for a whole year after Harry was born." He turned to Remus who was struggling to keep from laughing, "Now, don't you start, Moony."

Remus finally gave in to his laughter, drawing bewildered looks from Harry and Rose. After a few seconds, Remus stopped laughing and just grinned, "Sorry, Padfoot. I couldn't resist after seeing your face." He then sobered up, "What did happen between the two of you? I thought it was getting serious. You never date a girl for more than a couple of months."

Sirius frowned, "It **was** getting serious. Then, after Rose was born, the Deatheaters were stepping up their attacks, especially on Aurors and their families. I thought it was too dangerous for her to be seeing me. I broke up with her, even when she didn't want to. It wasn't a pretty scene. We haven't seen each other since."

Harry was surprised his godfather didn't make an effort to make a 'serious/Sirius' joke.

"She's still single, Padfoot," Remus said, softly, "I think she still has feelings for you."

"No, no, Moony," Sirius said, just as softly, "If You-know-who is back, then it's still dangerous."

"If you say so, Padfoot," Remus said.

Harry and Rose exchanged glances but remained silent.

After a few minutes, Remus spoke up, "I think it'll take a while for Lily to deliver your new brother and sister. Let's get some dinner. The coffee shop is just around the corner."

After their meal, there was still no word. Harry and Rose got out their books and did their homework while sitting on the bed. Eventually, they fell asleep.

Meanwhile, Ginny was in the almost empty Gryffindor Common Room, doing an essay for Potions. She felt Harry fall asleep and smiled. She was glad he was getting some rest. She wished she could also go to bed.

The Portrait opened up. Ginny quickly drew her wand but sighed in relief when Hermione stepped in.

"Where have you been?" Ginny asked the older girl, "It's late already. What were you doing alone?"

"Shh," Hermione whispered, as she sat beside Ginny, "I was in the library, researching about the Bond. I found some interesting facts about it. Is Harry awake? I'd like to go through this just once."

"Sorry, Hermione," Ginny said, "He just fell asleep. Can't you just tell me first? We can tell Harry and Rose when they get back."

Hermione thought about it for a minute or two then she got several pieces of parchment from a pocket of her robes and said, "Okay, Ginny. I don't know how much Professor Dumbledore told you and Harry, but here's what I found."

Hermione's voice turned to the lecture-mode tone Ginny often heard her use on Ron and Harry, "The Soul bond is a form of magical binding of two people in love which allows the couple to feel their partner's feelings and sense their thoughts when they are together, amplifying their love for each other. It also allows them to share their magical energy, though it causes exhaustion. The Bond is usually created by a magical ritual done by a married couple who have been in love with each other since their teens."

Hermione turned to Ginny, "There's a long essay on the ritual itself but I think we can skip that." She turned back to her notes after Ginny nodded, "The Bond, however, has been created naturally in several instances. All these occurrences have several things in common. First, a powerful wizard saves the one he loves at the peril of his own

life. Second, the witch he saves is also in love with him and would have died if he had not saved her. Third, and most important, they are unaware of the other's feelings."

Hermione looked up at Ginny, wide-eyed, "Wow, that sure covers what happened in the Chamber."

Ginny, who was also wide-eyed, nodded, "Wh-what else did you find about the Bond?"

"Oh, yes, um," Hermione said, looking through her notes, "Well, according to stories about those who had the Bond form naturally, they started to experience each other thoughts and feelings soon after the event wherein the wizard saved the witch. These naturally formed Bonds developed to become stronger than the ones formed by the ritual. The couples were able to share their feelings and thoughts over longer distances. Some were even able to talk to each other over a distance of up to 100 miles."

Hermione put down her notes and looked up again at Ginny, "Have you tried talking to Harry since he and Rose went to St. Mungo's?"

"Er, yes, I have," Ginny said, "Hermione, how far do you think it is from here to St. Mungo's?"

"I'm not sure," Hermione said, "but since it's in London, it's definitely farther than 100 miles."

"Wow," Ginny said, looking a bit stunned, "Until today, the farthest distance we've talked over was within Hogwarts. Before that, we were feeling each other's emotions between the Burrow and Potter Manor. That's barely 30 miles apart."

"Oh, that's interesting," Hermione said, "From the looks of it, yours may be the strongest one yet. If it is the Soul Bond you and Harry are forming, you'll be the youngest couple to form the Bond. Until now, the youngest couple was about 17 and 15 years old when they started to form the Bond."

"Wow, that's something," Ginny said, "Er, Hermione, you mentioned those things that the naturally formed Bonds had in common. Where

did you get that information? Professor Dumbledore said no one knew the exact circumstances when the Bond forms.”

“Well, the exact circumstances aren’t the same, but they have those similarities,” Hermione replied, “As to where I got the information, I, um, found a book in the Restricted Section of the Library.”

Ginny raised one eyebrow, “The Restricted Section? How did you get in there? I don’t think that you asked a teacher for permission.”

Hermione turned red and pulled out a silvery piece of cloth from another pocket, “Er, no, I didn’t. I, um, sneaked up to the boy’s dormitory earlier and nicked Harry’s cloak from his trunk. I sneaked into the Restricted Section under it.”

Ginny giggled, “You didn’t? Oh, Hermione, Harry would be proud of you, not to mention Ron and the twins.”

Hermione handed the cloak to Ginny, “Here, you give it back to Harry. The rest of the stuff I found about the Bond can wait until he and Rose get back. After all, you still have that essay to finish for Professor Snape.”

Ginny groaned, “You had to mention that. Oh, all right, I’ll get back to work.”

Hermione smiled, “Don’t worry. I know you do good work, even for Snape. Good night, Gin.”

Ginny grimaced, “Good night, Hermione.”

Harry felt he had just gone to sleep when he was shaken awake by a hand on his shoulder.

“Harry, wake up,” a voice said. It took him a few seconds to recognize that it was Sirius’ voice, “wake up, kiddo.”

“Wha-what time is it?” Harry said, looking up at a blurred image of his godfather.

"It's almost noon, Harry," Sirius said, handing him his glasses, "It's time to meet your new brother and sister."

Harry shot up to a sitting position, as he put on his glasses, "They're here?"

"Yup," Sirius said, grinning, "Your mum should be in here in a few minutes with them."

Remus was gently shaking Rose, "Rose, come on, wake up."

Rose stretched and grinned, "Where are they? How's Mum?"

James came in the room at that moment, "Your mum's fine. She'll be here in a bit. As to your new siblings, Sam's cleaning them up before bringing them over."

"How was it, Dad? Rose asked, "Did mum have a hard time?"

"Not really," James said, "It wasn't as long as when she had you or Harry."

The door of the room opened again, this time revealing a tired looking Lily sitting in a wheelchair, holding two bundles in her arms, one blue and the other pink.

James moved up to her to get one of the bundles. He brought it over to Harry and Rose.

"Harry, Rose," he said, "meet Andrew James Potter." He placed him carefully in Rose's arms.

They peered into the bundle to see a pink face with tiny wisps of red hair.

"*Oh, no,*" Harry thought, "*He might be mistaken for a Weasley.*"

"*And what's wrong with that, Potter?*"

"*Oops, I didn't realize you were awake already, Ginny. Er, nothing wrong with that. It's just that he's my brother. I want to make sure people know he's a Potter.*"

"Well, all right. For a second, I thought you didn't like Weasleys anymore."

"How can I not, when I'm in love with the youngest Weasley."

"All right, I forgive you for that remark. He is quite cute."

"That he is. Here comes Dad with my sister."

"Now, this is Daisy Amelia Potter," James said, holding the pink bundle for them to see.

Harry didn't miss seeing Sirius raise his eyebrows or his Dad giving Sirius a stern look when James had said the name.

Daisy looked almost like Andrew and had a tuft of black hair already. She opened her eyes and it seemed to be brown.

"She's real cute, Harry. I like them both."

"Yeah, they look cute. I wonder though how they'll be in a few months."

"Probably just like Fred and George. Charlie once told me they wouldn't stop moving around once they were able to crawl."

"Oh great, just what we need, younger versions of Gred and Forge."

Ginny giggled, *"I'd like to see how your parents would handle them."*

Harry shook his head, grinning mentally, *"I doubt Mum would have much trouble. She's been handling Dad and Sirius for years and they're as bad as Fred and George."*

"That's true. Well, anyway, I'm going to lunch, Harry. When are you coming back here?"

"Dunno. I'll ask Dad." Harry turned to his father, "Dad, now that the twins are born, when can we get back to Hogwarts? I have some more homework to do."

"Hey, I don't want to go back yet," Rose said, "You just want to get back so you can see Ginny."

"Well, er, that is...." Harry said, intelligently. He could feel Ginny laughing and feeling happy that Harry wanted to see her.

James laughed, "How about before dinner? That way, you can surprise her and get to eat a good Hogwarts meal, not the questionable hospital food. Remus has a portkey back to Hogwarts that can be activated by a password since you can't floo back. It'll take you straight to Albus' office. "

"Okay, that's fine, Dad," Harry said, *"I'll see you, Gin. Meet me outside the Headmaster's office before dinner."*

"All right, Harry. See you."

A few hours later, they were saying goodbye to James, Lily and the babies.

Harry could feel Ginny walking down the corridors of the castle, heading for Dumbledore's office, anxious to see him. He felt the same.

Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his back that seemed to come from Ginny. Then he lost consciousness.

"Harry!" James said, rushing over to his son, who had suddenly collapsed.

Harry stirred the moment James touched him. James helped him sit up.

"What happened, son?" James asked, "Is it your scar?"

"No!" Harry said, getting up, "Something happened to Ginny. I felt it. She was walking to the Headmaster's office when something hit her in the back and she blacked out. We have to get to her! Remus! Where's the portkey?" Harry looked frantic.

"Slow down, Harry," James said, "How do you know this? How'd you know it's Ginny?"

Rose touched her father's arm with her hand, "He knows, Dad. Trust me, he knows. If he says something happened to Ginny, then something did."

"How can he know, Rose?" Remus asked.

"I just do, okay?" Harry said, his voice rising, "We need to get back to Hogwarts now, Remus, right now!"

The adults looked at each other, bewildered.

"Well, all right," Remus said, "Sirius, come on. If something has happened to Ginny, we'll need your help. James, you stay with Lily."

"Well, all right, Moony," James said, looking worriedly at his panicking son, "Let me know if you need my help."

Remus took an old leather glove from his pocket and held it out, "Okay, Harry, Rose, Padfoot, take a grasp of the glove." Once they all had a hold of it, Remus said, "Home to the castle." They vanished with a pop.

A/N: Heheh, another cliffie, Sorry, that's just the way I see it. Did anyone like the names of the new Potter siblings? How about the details Hermione found about the Bond. That's just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Harry and Ginny will find more later.

Now, some explanations about a few things in this chapter. I found no mention of a maternity ward at St. Mungo's on the HP Lexicon so I placed it on the top floor. Accordint to the same source, the location of the Burrow should be close to London to allow Arthur to use Muggle taxis to bring Harry and his friends to King's Cross Station without bankrupting him. I then placed Potter Manor near enough to allow the kids to go back and forth without much hassle.

Chapter 36: Once more to the rescue

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

Harry, Rose, Sirius and Remus landed on the floor of the Headmaster's office. Harry immediately got up and ran out the door. There was no sign of Dumbledore in the office.

"Harry, wait for us!" he heard Remus call after him, but he didn't stop.

Harry ran down the moving stairs and reached the foot of the stairs in seconds. He frantically looked around.

"Ginny! Ginny! Where are you?" he called in his mind. There was no answer, yet he felt her somewhere in the area, within a few miles of him.

The corridors were empty and dark except for the light from the torches on the wall. Then he spotted something long and thin on the floor. He stooped to pick it up. It was Ginny's wand.

"Harry!" he heard behind him. He turned around to see Remus and Rose coming down the moving stairs.

"Look!" Harry said, holding out the wand, "This is Ginny's. She was here. Something happened to her. She wouldn't go anywhere in the castle without it."

"Harry," Sirius said, "You said back at St. Mungo's that she was walking here when something happened to her. How did you know that?"

"It doesn't matter now, Sirius," Harry said, agitated now, "What matters is that we find her. Someone hit her with some kind of spell that knocked her unconscious. She must be nearby."

Sirius and Remus exchanged a look and sighed.

"All right, Harry," Sirius said, "we'll start looking. Remus, I'd say the rest of the school is at dinner in the Great Hall. Tell Dumbledore what

we think has happened. We'll need help searching the castle. Rose, why don't you go with Remus?"

"No," Rose said, "Let me go with you and Harry. I can help look for her."

Sirius looked at Harry who nodded. Sirius sighed, "All right. Let's go."

They all headed for the ground floor. At the foot of the main stairs, Remus turned for the Great Hall.

Sirius turned to Harry and Rose, "All right. Assuming that Harry is right and Ginny has been stunned and kidnapped, who would be the one most likely to do that?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Rose said suddenly. She then broke into a run back up the stairs.

"Hey, Rose!" Harry called after her, "where are you going?" She didn't answer and he turned back to Sirius, shaking his head.

"Well, never mind her for now," Sirius said, "Now, back to my question, who'd attack Ginny?"

"Well, there's Malfoy and his cronies," Harry said, "That's Draco, by the way. I'm glad I can go back to calling him by his last name. Having to refer to him by his first name was just too creepy and familiar."

"Okay, so it could be our favorite Slytherins," Sirius said, "but then they'd have to miss dinner. It would be too obvious. Anyone else you can think of?"

"No, no one," Harry said, his thumb and index finger gripping his chin, "Wait a minute, you don't think that Wormtail...."

"It's a possibility, Harry," Sirius said.

"But why?" Harry asked, "He was put in Azkaban years ago, just as we started to be friends with the Weasleys. He wouldn't know that grabbing her would make me chase him, would he?"

"I don't know, Harry," Sirius said, wearily.

Just then, Rose came running down the stairs.

"Where have you been?" Harry asked, crossly, "We have to find Ginny. I know she's close but not where, at least not until she wakes up."

"I just remembered we have the perfect weapon to find Ginny and whoever grabbed her," Rose said, waving a piece of parchment at them.

"Of course," Harry said, slapping his forehead, "the Marauder's Map! Rose, you're a genius."

Rose smiled, "I know." She started to spread out the Map before them.

Just then, Remus appeared, accompanied by Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Hagrid, Sprout, Flitwick, Sinistra, Vector and, unfortunately, Snape. Ron, Hermione, Neville, Fred, George and Ti were right behind them. Rose quickly hid the map out of sight.

Ron ran up to Harry, "Harry, are you sure that Ginny's been kidnapped?"

"Yes, Ron," Harry said, "Please don't ask me how I know right now. Just trust me on this."

Ron gave a small smile, "When have I not trusted you on things, Potter?"

"Are you sure she's not in the dormitory, Potter?" Snape said, "Maybe she's had enough of you and is hiding."

"I'm sure she's not, Professor," Rose said before Harry could retort, "I was just there."

Harry looked angrily at Snape, his eyes smoldering with hate. Sirius was also glowering at the greasy-haired professor.

“All right, Severus, that’s enough,” Dumbledore said, “We’ll have to find her.”

He turned to Harry and asked in a kindly voice, “Harry, do you know where she last was?”

“She was in the corridor leading to the stairs to your office, professor,” Harry said, ignoring the inquiring looks on the faces of Ron, the twins, Ti, most of the professors and Sirius.

“All right,” Dumbledore said, turning to the professors and Sirius, “We’ll search the castle. Severus will search the dungeons and sub-levels with Argus. Remus and Sirius will take the first and second floors, Filius and Pomona, take the third and fourth floors, Victoria (Sinistra) and Lucinda (Vector), please take the fifth and sixth floors, Minerva and I will search the seventh floor and the North and West Towers. Hagrid, please check the grounds. Be careful, we are not sure who has done this but they may be dangerous.”

With that, the adults all separated. Sirius just shrugged his shoulders to Harry and went off with Remus, heading up the stairs to the next floor.

Dumbledore turned to Harry and his friends, “Harry, I think you and your friends should join the rest of the students in the Great Hall. I have already asked the Head Boy and Head Girl to keep everyone inside until we find Miss Weasley.”

“Please, professor,” Harry begged, “Let us help you. You know I can help.”

“All right, Harry,” Dumbledore said, kindly, “You and your friends can search this floor. However, if the one responsible for taking Miss Weasley is who I suspect, you are in grave danger. The risk is too great. Wait here if you don’t find her.” He turned to McGonagall, “All right, Minnie,”

As soon as Dumbledore and McGonagall were out of sight, Harry turned to Rose, “She’s not on this level, sis. I can’t feel her. I should be able to even if she’s knocked out. Bring out the map.”

Rose opened the parchment and said the magic words, *"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."*

The map formed on the parchment.

The eight children looked at the map, searching through the names.

That's strange. I never noticed the Map getting green. Harry thought as he searched for Ginny.

Finally, Neville said, "There she is. She's in the area of Hogsmeade. Blimey, she's in the Shrieking Shack."

"I-i-isn't that supposed to be the most haunted building in Britain?" Ti asked.

"Er, that's made up, Ti," Rose said, "It's not really haunted. I'll tell you about it some time."

"She seems to be alone," Ron said.

Harry nodded, "Good. I'm going to her." He started to move off but felt a hand on his arm hold him back. Looking back, he saw Hermione's face.

"Let me go, Hermione!" Harry said, "I have to get her back!"

"Wait, Harry," Hermione said, "We have to let the professors know where she is."

"There's no time!" Harry shouted, "Who knows when whoever grabbed her will be back? I have to go now!"

Hermione let go of him, tears starting to form in her eyes.

Harry sighed, tears forming in his own eyes, "Look, Hermione, I have to do this. I can't stand just waiting around while she's in danger. If it's Pettigrew who captured her then it's me he wants. He'll forget about her and let her go when he sees me."

"Pettigrew?" Fred asked, "You mean the git that..."

“...betrayed your family to You-Know-who?” George said.

“Thought he was.....” Fred said.

“....in Azkaban,” George said.

“Er, he escaped about a month ago,” Rose said, “Dad and Sirius came over and warned us that he might come and take us for revenge for being placed in Azkaban.”

Fred turned to Harry, “All right, mate,” he said, “you can go get Ginny.”

“But we’re going with you,” George said.

“After all, she’s our sister,” Fred said.

“And you’ve already saved her once,” George said.

“Yeah, Harry,” Ron said, “we’ll all go. Then we can watch your back in case whoever got her comes back.”

“That’s right, Harry,” Neville said, “Between us, we should be able to capture that git while we save Ginny.”

Harry smiled and said, “Thanks, guys, let’s go.”

“Wait a minute, Harry,” Hermione said, as she turned to Ti, “Ti, you should stay here.”

“No way!” Ti said, turning to Harry, “Harry! Let me help. I want to save Ginny with you. She’s been a good friend to me.”

Harry put one hand on Ti’s shoulder, “Ti, you can help. You can help by waiting for the professors to come back and telling them where we went. That’s a very important job, especially if we get into trouble.”

Ti thought about that for a moment then he nodded, “All right, Harry. You can count on me. I’ll send the teachers to you as soon as they come back.”

Harry smiled, "Thanks, mate." He turned to the others, catching Hermione's approving smile, "All right, let's go. We'll have to go through the Whomping Willow. There's a passage to the Shack that starts among its roots."

The seven Gryffindors went out through the front doors. They sprinted across the grounds, past Hagrid's Hut up to the Whomping Willow, where they stopped, looking at the massive, old tree in apprehension.

The tree was already waving its branches.

"Okay," Ron said, "How do we get pass that bloody tree?"

"Ron!" Hermione said, "Language!"

"We'll try to sneak past it," Harry said, "Sirius told me about a knot on the tree that calms it down when pressed. We just have to pass its branches."

"Oh, great," Neville said, looking in apprehension at the tree's flailing branches.

The seven children moved closer to the wildly flailing tree, weaving and jumping to dodge the branches.

Then, a thick branch slammed Fred and George at waist level, hurling them back to land in a heap 50 feet away.

"Fred, George!" Harry cried. He sprang back and ran to them.

Harry knelt down in front of the twins and checked their pulses like he'd seen on television. Harry couldn't tell if they had broken anything but, at least, they were alive, though knocked out.

Then, Neville yelled, "I'm through the branches. I see the knot. There, got it."

Sure enough, the branches of the Whomping Willow stopped moving. The others gathered around Harry and the unconscious twins.

"We can't wait for them to wake up," Harry said, "We have to go though someone needs to watch over them." He looked at Rose, "You stay here, sis."

"No, Harry," Rose said, "I'm going with you. I want to help save Ginny. She's been my friend for ages, not to mention, my future sister-in-law."

Harry's face went red at that last comment, "Well, someone's got to stay here."

"I'll stay, Harry," Neville said, walking up to them, "You four go on and save Ginny."

Harry looked up at him and smiled, "Thanks, Nev. You've been great help already. Wait for the teachers. Hopefully, Remus and Sirius will be here soon." He turned to Ron, Hermione and Rose, "All right, let's go."

The four Gryffindors moved to the roots of the Whomping Willow where there seemed to be an opening.

Peering in, Harry saw it was the beginning of a tunnel. He looked back at the other three, "All right, I think we go through here." He ducked down and went into the darkness.

Meanwhile, Remus and Sirius were searching the rooms on the second floor.

"Remus, I think this is a waste of time," Sirius said, "Somehow, Harry knows that something happened to Ginny. Maybe he can find her without us running around like headless chickens."

Remus turned to him, "Well, I doubt the Headmaster would have sent us out to search the whole castle if he thought Harry could help us."

"That's because he doesn't know about the Marauder's Map," Sirius said.

“That’s right,” Remus said, “I’ve forgotten James told us that he had given it and the cloak to his children. We’ve better get back to the kids.”

“Good,” Sirius said, turning around the way they had come, “because Rose already had the Map and was about to activate it when you came with Albus and the rest of the professors. As much as I think Albus would have enjoyed examining the Map, I doubt Minerva and Snivellus would have been as happy to ignore its use for trouble making.”

Remus smiled, “I gather that.”

As they reached the end of the corridor, Sirius asked, “Remus, can mold affect parchment?”

Remus raised an eyebrow, “I don’t think so. Why do you ask?”

“Because I caught a glimpse of the Map in Rose’s hand before she hid it,” Sirius said, “There was a tinge of green on the map. Do you remember what had a tinge of green the last time we saw it?”

Remus paled, “You don’t think....? Merlin! I gave it to Peter after we made the final one.”

With that they broke into a run down the stairs. As they neared the bottom, they saw that the Entrance Hall was empty except for one small boy, seated on the last step.

“Ti!” Sirius called, “where are the others?”

Ti stood up, “Sirius! We looked at that strange map Rose has. It showed Ginny in the S-s-shrieking shack. They went to get her.”

Sirius stopped in front of Ti, “Did you see anyone with Ginny?”

Ti shook his head, “No, she seemed to be alone.”

“Seemed to be is right,” Remus said, “Come on, Padfoot, we better get going.”

“Let me come with you!” Ti said.

“No!” Sirius said, “This is dangerous. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“But, the others....” Ti started to say.

“The others went because we weren’t here to stop them from going,” Remus said, kindly as he knelt down beside the boy, “Ti, please wait here for the rest of the professors. You have to tell them where we went, okay?”

Ti slowly nodded his head, “Okay, professor.”

Remus and Sirius then nodded to each other, drew their wands and went out the front doors of the castle, at a dead run.

Harry, Ron, Rose and Hermione walked slowly down the dark tunnel. Only Hermione’s wand was lit. The others had theirs ready at their side.

After several minutes, they came up to the start of some wooden steps that headed upward, curving slightly to the right. Harry could feel the presence of Ginny at the top of those stairs.

“Rose,” Harry whispered, “Let’s take a look at the map again.”

Rose activated the map and the four Gryffindors looked again at the area of the map corresponding to their location.

“All right,” Harry whispered again, “there’s Ginny. I think she’s in the room at the top of these stairs. There’s a door there. Looks like she’s still alone.”

He looked at Rose and Hermione, “Ron will come with me up to the room while you two stay down here, in case Pettigrew or whoever did this comes back.”

Rose and Hermione exchanged a glance then nodded.

“Good,” Harry whispered, “Come on, Ron. I’ll go first.”

Harry slowly went up the flight of stairs, heart pounding as the stairs creaked softly with his every step. Finally, after what seemed like hours but was only a few minutes, he reached the top step.

The door before him had a few holes in them. Through one of the holes, he could see a small form with red hair lying on a couch.

"Ginny! Wake up!" he called to her mentally. She stirred sluggishly but didn't awaken.

Desperate, Harry quickly turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. Before Ron could stop him, Harry rushed into the room to Ginny's side. She seemed to be tied up by ropes and gagged with a piece of cloth.

He could hear some footsteps behind him that sounded like Ron's, coming closer. He knelt beside the bed Ginny was on and began untying her.

"Ginny, please wake up," "Come on, Gin, wake up," he said both verbally and mentally, his voice growing louder as the seconds passed as Ginny barely stirred.

Finally, she opened her eyes and gazed wearily at him, "Harry," she said, softly.

Suddenly, her eyes widened as they looked behind the two boys, *"Harry! Look out behind you,"* she screamed in his head.

As Harry started to turn around, he heard someone say "Expelliarmus!" twice and felt his wand fly out of his hand. A yelp of surprise beside him signaled to Harry that Ron had lost his wand as well.

A high pitched voice then said "Colloportus," and the door shut and locked. By then Harry had turned around to face the source of the voice.

In front of them, standing in where he would have been behind the door as he and Ron had entered, was a short balding man who seemed to have once been plump and was dressed in a dirty striped

outfit with numbers on it. The man had a haunted, mad look in his eyes.

“At last,” he said, a grin on his face, “You are here. Hello, Harry. My, but how much you have grown. You really look like James. I’m sure many people have told that. Ah, but you have Lily’s eyes. Such beautiful eyes she has.”

A hot anger coursed through Harry and he felt the same coming from Ginny who was now standing beside him. How dare this man mention his parents like they were still his friends, he who had betrayed them to Voldemort.

“You bastard!” Harry shouted at him, “How dare you mention them?” He pushed Ginny behind him.

“No, Harry! Let me at that pathetic excuse of a wizard. How dare he sneak behind me!”

“Wait a minute, Ginny! Stay behind. I’ll distract him. I’ve got your wand in my back pocket. Slowly reach for it.”

He continued talking to Wormtail, “How the hell did you get behind us? Where the hell were you?”

Wormtail was now smirking as he answered him, “I’ve been here all along, Harry, just waiting for you to come save your girlfriend.”

“What do you mean, been here all along?” Harry asked, perplexed now, “You weren’t in the room on the map.”

Wormtail grinned, “Oh you mean this map?” He held up a familiar looking piece of parchment, “I’m so sorry, Harry, but **this** is the Marauder’s Map. What you probably used to try to find your lovely girlfriend with is merely a test map we used to perfect the spells we needed to make the real map. It’s surprising how easily a small rat can get around Hogwarts. I managed to exchange them while everyone was in class a while ago. I’ve been here for weeks now, watching you and your little group.” He now scowled, “You were always together and there were too many people in the castle. I

couldn't get to you, Harry. So, I had to make you come to me. Luckily, I found your girlfriend alone this afternoon."

"Ginny, I'm so sorry. It's my fault you were stunned and captured."

"Harry, don't blame yourself. I should have asked Hermione or Ron to come with me earlier. But I was so eager to see you, we both were. Never mind that for now. I've got my wand. What do we do?"

"All right, I'll keep him talking. When I say so, try to stun him then accio my wand to me and we'll get him."

Wormtail was now smiling, "I knew once I had here, you'd try to find her and rescue her. All I had to do was make sure you didn't know I was here. I hoped you would use the Map and you did. Now, here you are."

"Now that I'm here," Harry said, "what are you going to do? What do you want with me?"

He grinned, a maniacal glint in his eye, "I'm going to kill you, Harry. Because of you, I was placed in Azkaban. If it wasn't for you, the Dark Lord would not have allowed that to happen. I served him loyally. He would have helped me."

"You bastard!" Harry said, "You served him loyally by betraying my parents. They were your friends and you betrayed them! Thank Merlin they're still alive."

"Enough of this," Wormtail said, "Now that he is back, he will reward me for killing you." He started to raise his wand.

"Now, Ginny!" Harry yelled in his mind to her as he dove to one side behind a sofa.

"Stupefy!" Ginny cried, her wand pointed at Wormtail, then she cried, "Accio Harry's wand," as she jumped towards Harry.

Ginny's spell had knocked Wormtail off his feet. Harry caught his wand when it flew out of Wormtail's hand.

Wormtail started to get up almost immediately, firing a stunner at Ron which missed as the red head jumped out of the way behind the couch Ginny had been on.

Then, Ginny said, "Chiropterus Muccus!"

Wormtail screamed as large bat-shaped gobs of snot came out of his nose and crawled all over his face.

"Stupefy!" Harry cried, just as the door exploded open.

Hermione and Rose rushed into the room. They would have gone right into the path of Harry's spell if Rose hadn't grabbed Hermione and pulled her down.

Unfortunately, they distracted Harry enough for his spell to miss. Wormtail then leaped behind a large four-poster bed, still battling the bat bogeys coming out of his nose.

"Hermione, Rose," Harry shouted, "Make sure he doesn't come out behind that bed. Ginny and I will try something."

Hermione and Rose nodded and kept their wands trained on opposite sides of the bed.

Harry and Ginny were crouching now side by side behind the sofa. Harry took hold of Ginny's hand. They felt a sharp jolt pass between them, though they felt no pain.

"Harry? What was that?"

"I have no idea, Ginny. Let's worry about it later. Right now, this is what we have to do to get this guy. I'll fire a reduction curse on the bed. Hopefully, it throws the bed away from him. Once he's visible, shoot a stunner at him. I'll try to do the same."

"Okay, Harry. Let's do this." Harry could feel the determination in her mental voice.

Merlin, that's one reason I love her, he thought.

"Save it for later, Potter. I still want to show you how much I missed you." Harry could feel her smirk.

"All right, Gin. Get ready. One, two, three!"

"Reducto!" Harry shouted. The red bolt from his wand hit the bed and blew it into five pieces, revealing the crouching Wormtail.

"Stupefy!" Ginny shouted a bare second after Harry. Her spell caught their opponent and threw him against the wall. He then slumped to the ground, totally out.

"What the hell!" Ron said as he stood up slowly from behind the couch. He whistled, "Merlin! Those were some strong spells you and Ginny just cast, Harry."

Harry and Ginny stood up and gazed at the prone form of their foe and the remains of the large bed, their eyes wide. Then, they looked down and noticed that their hands were still joined. They could feel a tingle still running through them.

Meanwhile, Hermione came up and conjured ropes to hold Wormtail. Ron stooped down to pick up his wand from where Wormtail had dropped it.

As they all gathered in the center of the room, they heard footsteps pounding up the stairs.

Remus and Sirius burst into the room and skidded to a halt, staring at the five wands pointed at them.

"Whoa, kids!" Sirius said, "It's just us. Where's Wormtail?"

"Over there," Rose pointed at the bound body.

Sirius' eyes grew wide and he gazed at the remains of the bed, "Wow, you kids can sure fight. I'm glad I'm on your side."

"Well," Rose said, "That was all Harry and Ginny."

Harry felt a flush on his face. He knew Ginny was also blushing. Then, he suddenly felt his head swimming and the room started spinning.

He saw Ginny shaking her head and knew she was also getting light-headed.

Finally, he saw the floor coming up towards him and knew no more.

Chapter37: Revealing the Bond

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

Harry slowly opened his eyes. He seemed to be lying down on a bed. He wondered where he was but his vision was blurry. He turned his head to look for his glasses but started to get dizzy. He unintentionally made a moaning sound as he shut his eyes tight to dispel the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him.

He felt the bed sag as someone sat on it beside him. Then he opened his eyes to see a blurred face crowned with red staring down at him.

“Gin?” he asked, his voice sounding a bit hoarse.

A gentle laugh came out of the person above him as he felt his glasses being placed gently on his face.

“Sorry, lover boy,” the person said, “it’s just me.”

His vision cleared so that he saw the person above him was his sister. Harry saw that white curtains had been drawn around his bed. He must be in the Hospital wing.

Harry smiled, “Hi, sis. How’re you doing?”

“It’s not me you should worry about, big brother,” Rose said, her voice suddenly serious, “It’s you and your girl.”

“Ginny!” Harry said, “Where is she?” He stretched out his mind and then he sighed as he felt her nearby.

“She’s in the next bed, Harry,” Rose said, “Asleep, just like you were a while ago. What happened, Harry? You and Ginny just collapsed right after we got Wormtail.”

“I really don’t know, sis,” Harry said, “I suddenly felt weak and dizzy then I blacked out. Just before I lost it, I felt her getting dizzy, too.”

Just then, Madame Pomfrey pecked in through a gap in the curtains. "Ah, good, you're awake, Mr. Potter," she said, "Move aside, Miss Potter. I must examine your brother now he is awake."

The nurse stepped inside the area and ran her wand over Harry after muttering a spell.

"Well, you appear to be in perfect health, Mr. Potter," she said, "for someone who has been unconscious for several days."

Harry's eyes widened, "Several days? Sis, how long have I been unconscious?"

"Well, er," Rose said, "We went after Wormtail Sunday evening, Harry. It's now afternoon of the second Monday after. You and Ginny have been unconscious the whole time."

"Eight days?" Harry said, "We've been asleep for eight days? What happened to us? Did the Headmaster say anything?"

"Well, Harry," Rose said, "When you two fell unconscious, Remus and Sirius levitated you both onto a pair of stretchers and brought you here. Professor Dumbledore and Dad came and asked us, me, Ron, Hermione, and Neville, to leave. The twins were kept here for observation after they were healed from the damage the Whomping Willow had caused them. We camped out in the corridor all night. Professors McGonagall and Snape went in as well. No one told us anything until the next morning. Then, Professor Dumbledore just said you and Ginny needed to sleep. He never gave us a reason for that."

Harry looked at Madame Pomfrey with a questioning gaze.

"I can't tell you anything, Mr. Potter," the nurse said, "not without the headmaster's permission. He did ask me to inform him when either you or Miss Weasley woke up. I must go call him now. Maybe he'll explain it to you." She left them then.

Harry turned back to Rose, "So, Fred and George are all right?"

"Oh, yeah," Rose said, "they only suffered a few bruises and lumps that Madame Pomfrey cured easily. She just kept them in for one night just to make sure. They did try to stay more by pretending to still be in pain. Madame Pomfrey gave a wave of her wand and pushed them out of the ward. They sulked for about a day but quickly recovered when some of their classmates asked about their encounter with the Whomping Willow. It made them instant celebrities." Rose laughed, "Now, the story gets bigger and bigger every time it gets retold."

Harry grinned, "That's just like them."

"Harry, where are you?" He heard Ginny call him in his mind. She still sounded sleepy.

"Don't worry, Gin. I'm right in the next bed. How are you?" Harry turned momentarily to Rose, "Ginny's awake now. I'm asking her how she feels."

"I feel stiff and wooly," Ginny replied, *"like I've been sleeping for a whole week."*

"That's because you did, Gin, or we did."

"Huh, we did?" Ginny said, *"Why?"*

"I don't know, Ginny, but Dumbledore might. Madame Pomfrey called him to tell him one of us was awake."

"Do you think this has something to do with the Bond, Harry?"

"I don't know, Gin. Maybe it does. We'll just have to wait for Dumbledore."

Harry turned to Rose, "Er, sis, could you pull back the curtains? I'd like to see Ginny for myself."

Rose smirked as she stood up and drew the curtains back from their frame, revealing another set of curtains. She drew them back, too.

Harry now saw Ginny lying in another hospital bed.

“Morning, sleepy head, or rather, good afternoon,” he said to her, smiling. He felt stronger now.

Ginny smiled back, “Hey, hello to you, too.”

Just then, Dumbledore arrived in the Hospital Wing and smiled as he approached them, “Ah, I see our hero and heroine are awake.”

Harry and Ginny both blushed.

“Er, what are you talking about, Professor?” Ginny said, “I can’t be a heroine. I was the one being rescued.”

“Well, my dear Ginevra,” Dumbledore said, “It was the two of you who captured Pettigrew. In spite of the circumstances at the beginning, in the end, it was you and Harry who did the deed.”

The ward’s doors opened again, this time letting in Arthur, Molly, James, Remus and Sirius.

“Dad! Sirius! Remus!” Harry said.

“Mum! Dad!” Ginny cried.

The Weasley elders hugged Ginny while James clapped a hand on Harry’s shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. They then conjured some chairs to sit in between the two beds.

“Dad, how’s Mum and the twins?” Harry asked. He noticed his dad had dark circles under his eyes.

“She was a bit upset when she heard what you guys did,” James said, “but the twins have been keeping us awake so she’s had little time to think about it. Now, I’d like to know how you knew Ginny had been attacked and abducted right at the moment it happened.”

Harry turned to Ginny, “*What do we do, Gin?*”

“*I guess we’ll have to be honest with our parents, Harry and tell them about the Bond. After all, we told Rose and Hermione.*”

"I guess you're right, Ginny. I hope they don't make a big deal about this. Wait, I'll ask Professor Dumbledore to help us."

"Ask him to call Ron and Hermione, Harry. She found some useful information on the Bond. I think it's best we tell Ron while our parents are here. That way, he won't react like he did last New Years."

"All right, Gin."

Harry turned to Dumbledore though he noticed the other adults looking strangely at him and Ginny.

"Er, Professor, could you have Ron and Hermione come down to join us? It would be best for them to hear this, too."

"Of course, Harry," Dumbledore said. He turned to Remus, "Remus, would you please ask Ron and Hermione to join us? I believe they're in the Gryffindor Common Room."

"All right, Headmaster," Remus said and he left the hospital wing.

Dumbledore turned back to Harry, "Harry, I gather you have decided to tell your parents about the Bond."

"Yes, professor," Harry said, "Ginny and I have both decided that."

"Bond? What bond?" Molly asked.

"How did you two decide that?" James asked, "You've only just awakened and barely had a chance to talk."

"James, Molly, please," Dumbledore said, "All will be explained once Remus brings Ronald and Miss Granger here."

Harry and Ginny both sat up in their beds. The others lapsed into silence that lasted only a few minutes before Ron and Hermione came hurrying in with Remus. Unfortunately, Fred, George, Neville and Ti also came with them.

"Harry, Ginny," Hermione said, "You're both finally awake. Are you all right?"

Ron also had a relieved but concerned look on his face, "You had us worried there for quite a bit. Are you two really all right?"

"Yeah, bro," Ginny said, smiling, "We're fine, just a little stiff from being in bed for so long."

Fred and George grinned at them. Neville and Ti, looking relieved that their friends were all right and awake, smiled at Harry and Ginny.

Harry also smiled at them, but he looked at Ginny, *"Er, Gin, shall we tell your other brothers and Ti and Neville as well?"*

"We'll have to, Harry. They're here already. Fred and George would badger or prank us if we made them leave. I'm sure Ti and Neville won't say anything."

"All right, I guess it's time to be honest. I want all our family and closest friends to know we trust them."

Dumbledore called their attention, "Well, Harry, Ron and Hermione are here, though with a few other people than you intended."

"That's all right, professor," Harry said, "They'd find out anyway somehow later. Ginny and I have agreed to tell them all. However, could you make sure what we reveal won't leave this area?"

"Of course, Harry," Dumbledore said. He raised his wand and warded the entire area, casting spells to shield them from eavesdroppers.

"All right, Albus," Molly said, "Now, what is going on with my daughter and Harry?"

"Well, Molly," Dumbledore said, "I believe what happened to Harry and Ginny after the confrontation with Pettigrew is related to James' question of how Harry knew Ginny was in trouble. You see, these two wonderful young people are in the midst of forming a Soul Bond."

"A Soul Bond, Albus?" Arthur asked, "I've heard something of that. Isn't that formed by means of a magical ritual, a complex and powerful ritual?"

"That's the usual way, Arthur," Dumbledore said, "but there are a few instances where this form of magical binding forms naturally."

"How, Albus?" James asked, "How can that happen? What exactly is a Soul Bond?"

"Well, James," Dumbledore said, "through a certain set of circumstances or by means of a magical ritual, two people who have fallen in love with each other at a young age bind their souls and magic together for all eternity. It allows them to read each others feelings and thoughts and even sense each other over long distances. Though I must admit, Harry having felt Ginny's predicament here at Hogwarts all the way from London is the farthest distance over which I have heard that occur."

"But, Albus," Molly said, "what exact circumstances allowed Harry and Ginny to form a bond like that without any ritual? Does that mean that they already love each other that deeply?"

"Yes, Molly," Dumbledore said, smiling and a twinkle gleaming in his eye, "I believe so. It would have to be a true love of great strength and depth for the bonding process to begin. The natural Soul Bond forms over a period of time, usually over several months. As to the circumstances required, I believe Miss Granger has been researching about the Bond for a few weeks now and has found some interesting facts."

Hermione's face went crimson at Dumbledore's statement.

Ron looked at Hermione in surprise then anger, "You knew? You knew what was happening to them and you didn't tell me?"

"They told me, Ronald!" Hermione said to him, angry herself at his reaction, "Harry and Ginny told me and Rose just after Valentine's Day. I couldn't tell you without their permission."

Ron now glared at Harry and Ginny, "Why couldn't you tell me, especially you, Ginny? Is this Bond the reason you two are together?"

Ginny glared back at Ron, "No, Ron! We are together because we love each other. The Bond simply formed because of that love and what happened in the Chamber."

"The Chamber of Secrets?" Molly asked, "What has that horrible place got to do with the Bond?"

"Um, everything, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said, "The set of circumstances where a natural Soul Bond is formed was fulfilled by what happened in the Chamber that night Harry rescued Ginny."

She pulled some parchment out of her bag before continuing, "You see, according to the book *Magical Bonds, both by ritual and nature*, naturally formed Soul Bonds have several requirements that must be fulfilled in order for one to form. First, a wizard and witch who are very strong in magical power fall in love with each other at a young age, usually before the age of twelve. Second, an incident occurs where the wizard saves the witch he loves from a deadly fate at the peril of his own life. Third, and most important, they are unaware of the other's feelings at the time of the incident. The Bond starts to form during the incident, usually when they touch each other while he saves her."

"Wow," Sirius said, "I'd say that thing in the Chamber sure counts as Harry saving Ginny 'at the peril of his own life', doesn't it?"

"So, does that mean they have been in love with each other even before last year?" Molly asked. "They aren't just in puppy love or infatuation?"

Harry's and Ginny's cheeks turned pink at Molly's question.

Dumbledore smiled again, "It would appear their love is real, Molly. As I have said, a Soul Bond would only form in the presence of true love. It is a manifestation of a love that will last their whole lives."

"But, they're so young, Albus," Molly said.

"Ah, Molly, love does not know any age limits," Dumbledore said, "It finds you whether you are nine or ninety. Love at such a young age as theirs is a truly precious thing."

“Er, professor,” Harry said to Dumbledore, “you said earlier that what happened to us after we got Wormtail is related to the Bond. So, what happened to Ginny and me? Why did we get dizzy then black out? Why were we asleep for more than a week?”

“Well, Harry,” Dumbledore said, “the Bond increases the magical power of the two people who are bonded to each other. It also allows them to share their magical energy, letting them cast even more powerful spells. However, doing this can be exhausting, especially the first time. I believe physical contact is required to do it the first time.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, “we linked hands just before we cast our spells. We felt a shock pass between us then. There was still a tingle after Wormtail was down. We still had our hands linked, only letting go when we started to get dizzy.”

Dumbledore looked thoughtful, “That shock may have been your magical energy being shared with each other. Did you concentrate very hard on the spells you cast, Harry, Ginny?”

“Um, I think so, Professor,” Harry said, index finger and thumb touching his chin as he tried to remember, “I was worried that my reductor curse wouldn’t move the bed enough so I concentrated very hard as I cast it.”

“I also concentrated on my spell, sir,” Ginny said, “I’d cast a stunner at him earlier and it didn’t affect him much so I wanted it to be stronger.”

“Ah,” Dumbledore said, “That confirms my supposition. In concentrating as much power into your spells as you could, you both exhausted your magical reserves. That’s why you both fell unconscious afterwards. That’s also the reason why you both slept for this long. Your bodies needed rest to recharge your magic. Your having awakened now is a sign that your magical reserves are fully restored.”

“Does that mean we can get out of here, Professor?” Ginny asked.

Dumbledore smiled, "Ah, now that I leave to Madame Pomfrey. She's the expert on health. I dare not step into her domain."

Molly moved then to hug Ginny, then Harry.

"Oh, Harry," she said, tears starting to form in her eyes, as she hugged him fiercely, "I've known Ginny liked you a lot since she was about eight or nine, but I didn't know you felt the same."

"Er, I only realized it lately, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, his voice muffled by being pressed against the plump Weasley matriarch, "but I guess I was having those feelings for quite a bit longer."

"Now, Harry, dear," Molly said, "you'll have to learn to call me Molly. Of course, not until you're out of school and you and Ginny are married."

Harry's eyes grew wide, "Er, I don't think you need to worry about that for several years, Mrs. Weasley. I intend to be working for a living before asking Ginny to marry me."

Harry felt Ginny's mental squeal and warring emotions of disappointment for waiting that long and pride over his mature decision. He could hear the twins and Sirius snickering somewhere in the background. His own father had a smirk on his face.

Molly smiled, "I'm happy to hear that, Harry." She turned to her husband, "Say something, Arthur."

"Well," Arthur said, "I'm a bit overwhelmed to know that, at her young age, Ginny is already in a committed relationship where marriage is inevitable. However, knowing Harry as well as I do, and knowing his parents, I am very happy for the two of them."

He looked at James, smiling, "Well, James, in a few years, we'll really be family."

James smiled back, "It won't be that different, Arthur. We've already felt like family for years. Lily and I have never had the chance to say how grateful we have been for you and your family. Aside from Sirius and Remus, we haven't really anyone else. I'm glad for that."

"Hear, hear," Rose, Fred and George said together, grins on their faces. Everybody laughed at that, at least, almost everybody.

As most of the people in the ward separated to talk, Harry noticed Ti sitting by himself on another bed, a lost look on his face.

"Hey, Ti," he called the younger boy, "Come over here."

Ti slowly walked up to him, an uncertain look on his face.

"Hey, why the long face?" Harry asked.

"Er, I'm just not used to seeing so much happy emotions," Ti said.

Harry frowned, "I don't think that's the reason, Ti. Please, be honest with me. I'm your friend. I won't get mad."

Ti looked down at his feet, his arms behind his back, "Well, it's just that you let me hear about this Bond thing you have with Ginny and I'm not even part of either of your families. I've never really experienced the kind of closeness you all seem to have."

Harry placed a hand on Ti's shoulder, "I'm sorry if you've never had that kind of feeling, Ti," he said, "but I'd like you to know that, since you're with Sirius, you're a part of this family, all of it."

Ti looked at him for a moment then smiled, "Thanks, Harry. That means a lot to me right now." Then he was called by Fred and George and walked over to them.

A hand clasped Harry's shoulder in turn. Harry looked up to see Sirius' beaming face.

"Thanks, Harry," Sirius, "I'm glad you feel that way about Ti. He's a great kid. It's a wonder he turned out the way he is when he was raised by Lucius Malfoy."

"Well, I'm glad he's with you, Sirius," Harry said, "You need someone to show you there's more to life than dating every witch with a pretty face."

Sirius turned red, "Hey! I haven't dated anyone for the last couple of years. They just didn't have what I was looking for."

"Maybe because you found her already, Sirius," Ginny said, walking up to them and sitting on Harry's bed, "That Sam seemed nice. She still seems to like you, Sirius."

"How the bloody hell did you....." Sirius started to say, "Oh, it's that bond thing, isn't it? You saw her through Harry, didn't you?"

"Yeah, Sirius," Harry said, "she did. That's one of the things the Bond allows us to do. It was weird at first when it started to show. We couldn't separate what was in front of us from what the other was seeing. It was like some strange form of double vision. But lately, we've been able to turn from one to the other with some effort. Now, we're getting away from what I wanted to say. You should try to ask her out again, Sirius."

"Yes, Sirius," Ginny said, "I think she still cares for you. Otherwise, she wouldn't have minded you being in the same room."

Sirius sighed, "You really think so?" he asked.

"Well, there's only one way to find out," Remus said from behind him, "Go see her, Padfoot. I know you're worried about her being in danger from Death Eaters because you're an auror. At least tell her that and let her decide for herself. If she wants to resume your relationship, don't refuse her. It's not often one finds love these days."

Sirius looked at them with a thoughtful expression on his face, "All right. I'll try." After a few seconds of silence, he turned back to Harry, "Now enough of me, tell me, oh glorious godson, what have you and Ginny been up to since you got together? Been meeting up in any broom closets for a quick snog?"

Harry and Ginny turned crimson.

"Er, not exactly," Harry said, "Being able to talk to each other mentally helps to stave off the need to always be with each other. Of course, we do try to eat together and do other stuff together when we can get the time."

Someone snorted and the group looked to see Ron smirking at them, with the twins, Rose, Neville and Hermione beside him, amused expressions on their faces.

"When you can get the time?" Ron asked, "Honestly, if it wasn't for classes and having to sleep in separate dorms, these two would be with each other every single second. You know they actually walk around holding hands, even while eating? It's quite disgusting, really. OW! Hey, what'd you do that for?" He was rubbing the back of his head where Hermione had hit him. The bushy haired girl was glaring at him.

"Honestly, Ron, you're the most tactless, insensitive person I know. Imagine, telling on your sister and best friend. That is between them."

Ron scowled, "Yeah, well, they don't have to let me see that, especially when they're kissing. It looks like they're trying to suck each other's tonsils out. OW! Hey, cut that out, Hermione!" He was rubbing his right shin, which Hermione had just kicked.

"That's for continuing to be insensitive and embarrassing Harry and Ginny," Hermione said, still glaring at him, her hands on her hips, "Really, Ron."

Ron sat down on Ginny's bed, fuming. Fred and George were grinning. Rose had a smirk on her face, as did Neville.

Neville then spoke up, "Harry, I really appreciate being part of the group you and Ginny told about the Bond."

Harry smiled, "Of course, Nev. You're our friend. Plus, you're part of the New Marauders. We're glad to have you as part of our little circle."

"Yeah," Fred said, "we New Marauders..."

"....should stick together," George finished.

"That's right," Rose said, "together through thick and thin."

Just then, Molly came over to them, "Where's Percy? I expected he'd have been with you to see his sister after she'd waken up from a week-long coma."

Fred and George's faces darkened.

"Well, Mum," Fred said, "He was studying at a table in the Common Room when Professor Lupin came to get Ron and Hermione and told us that Harry and Ginny were awake. We expected him to follow us."

"But," George said, a scowl now on his face, "the git simply asked the Professor if Ginny was all right. When he was told she was otherwise fine, he just went back to reading his stupid Charms textbook. I know it's his NEWTS year, but for Merlin's sake, Ginny's his only sister."

"Yeah," Ron said, "We've been worried sick about Harry and Ginny this whole week and Perfect Percy, Big Head Boy, hadn't even bothered visiting the Hospital wing just once."

"Ron!" Molly said, "Please, don't say that about Percy. I'm sure he was also worried. He probably thought that there's nothing he could do and decided to use his time constructively rather than worrying needlessly. After all, Albus had already reassured us Harry and Ginny were in no danger." In spite of her words defending her third son, Molly's mouth was set in a straight line.

"Whatever, Mum," Ron said, "I'm not concerned with that git if he can't take even five minutes to visit with his family."

Molly didn't say anything more but Harry knew that Percy's blasé attitude about his sister's condition had not set well with his mother. He hoped the stuck up idiot wouldn't regret it.

Chapter 38: A Potter's promise

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Madame Pomfrey soon came and had the others leave the ward while she examined Harry and Ginny again. After several minutes, she declared them fit to leave the hospital wing and join the others for dinner in the Great Hall.

Harry and Ginny felt relief as they walked down the corridors with their friends and family. Then, Harry remembered something.

He turned to his father, "Dad, what happened to Wormtail after Ginny and I got him?"

James looked uncomfortable, "Well, son, um, Sirius called for some more aurors and they took him to the holding cells at the Ministry. The next day, Umbridge had him sent back to Azkaban. Um, the dementors gave him the Kiss as soon as he got there."

"What!" Harry was so shocked he stopped walking. He could feel Ginny was shocked, too. Everybody stopped walking, too, staring at the scene unfolding.

"But, Mr...er, James," Ginny said, "were you able to question him?"

"Yeah, Dad," Harry said, "he said something about Voldemort rewarding him for killing him now that old Voldiemold was back."

"He did?" James said, now stunned.

"Yes, he did!" Harry cried, "He could have told us where old snakeskin is. Why didn't you question him that night?"

Sirius placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, "I'm sorry, Harry. I was the auror here. I should have tried to ask him questions before carting him off to Ministry. But, between worrying he might transform to his animagus form and worrying about you and Ginny, I acted more like the worried Godfather than the responsible auror."

James sighed, "I'm sorry, too, Harry." He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes with one hand, "I came here as soon as I could leave your mother and the twins. I should have made that toad, Umbridge, let us interrogate him before shipping him back to Azkaban. I also was worried about you, and Ginny and I was angry at him at the time for trying to harm you kids."

Harry sighed, "It's all right, Dad. There's nothing that can be done now. We just lost an opportunity to find out about Voldemort's plans." He noticed that they had come to the main staircase. "I'm going back to Gryffindor Tower. I don't feel hungry right now." He headed up the stairs to the seventh floor and the Portrait Hole, practically running.

James watched his son flee toward Gryffindor Tower. He looked around at the remaining people in the corridor. Sirius and Remus had sorry looks on their faces. The Weasleys had looks of shock on their faces. The kids looked uncertainly at each other, obviously unsure of what had happened. All of them, except one.

Ginny glared at him and Sirius and took off after Harry.

James sighed as he watched her run after his distressed son, unable to erase from his memory the look of disappointment he had seen in the eyes of his almost-daughter-in-law.

James turned back to the group.

"James?" Arthur asked, his voice a little unsteady, "What did Harry mean? What was that about Voldemort being back? He can't be, can he? I mean, Harry got rid of him that night."

James sighed again, "I think we better go to Albus' office, Arthur. There's something I think you should know now that Harry's bonded to Ginny. Remus, please call Albus up to his office."

He turned to the other children, "You kids better go on to the Great Hall. Don't ask questions for now, please."

"Now even you guys have secrets," Rose said, "Fine. I'll talk to Harry and Ginny later." She stomped off down the stairs.

Hermione and Ron looked at them then up the stairs where Harry and Ginny had gone and finally followed Rose. Neville, Ti and the twins looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and descended the stairs.

James turned back to the Weasleys, "Come on, Arthur, Molly. Let's go."

Ginny followed Harry up to Gryffindor Tower. When she climbed in through the Portrait Hole, she found Harry seated on their favorite couch in front of the fireplace. She walked over and sat down beside him.

"*Harry?*" she called into his mind. She thought he wouldn't have responded if she had tried to say something verbally.

Still, he didn't answer her, but just sat there staring at the fire.

After a few minutes, she had enough and said in his mind, "*Harry, answer me or you'll feel my Bat bogey hex!*"

Finally, Harry said, "*Why is he after me, Gin?*"

Surprised by the question, Ginny stared at him, "What!"

Harry turned to face her, "This is the fourth time Voldemort's or some flunky of his has tried to kill me. Why? I was only a baby the first time. He didn't kill my parents yet he tried to kill me. Wormtail said he'd be rewarded for killing me. WHY? Why is it so important for Voldemort to kill me? I'm only a kid!" He buried his head in his hands.

Ginny could feel the anguish and turmoil rolling off him. She embraced him and placed her head on his shoulder, at the same time sent feelings of sympathy and comfort to him,

"I don't know, Harry. Whatever the reason, you shouldn't let it bother you. Professor Dumbledore and your parents will protect you. You're safe here at Hogwarts or Potter Manor."

He turned in her arms to face her, *"I guess. But I'm not worried just for me. There's you, too. With our bond, if I died, you'd die too. I don't want that to happen."*

Ginny tightened her embrace, *"I don't care, Harry! I don't want to go on without you. I'd rather die."*

Harry smiled, *"Well, I guess there's only one thing we can do. We'd have to be ready if anyone tried to get at me again."*

"So, we'll go on with our training," Ginny asked him.

"Yeah," Harry said, *"I'm sure Dad will agree with that. We'll have to find a way to use this extra power we have without passing out."*

"Yes, we should. I wouldn't want to have to be sent to St. Mungo's."

Just then, Harry's stomach let out a growl felt by both of them. Ginny giggled, *"I thought you weren't hungry."*

Harry grinned, *"I guess my body knows me better than I thought. I don't feel like eating in the Great Hall. After the stares I got the last two years after that thing with the Stone and the Chamber, I don't want to go there. How about a trip to the Kitchens?"*

"The Kitchens? Can you get in there?" she asked.

"Dad told me how to before I came here. Come on."

Harry got up and took Ginny's hand in his. Together, they left Gryffindor Tower for the Kitchens. Harry showed Ginny how to get in by tickling the pear on the picture covering the entrance.

When they entered the Kitchens, Harry was almost tackled by a blubbering small object.

"Oh, the great Harry Potter has come to visit Dobby!" a high-pitched voice sounded from the object now clasped around Harry's legs.

"Dobby! What are you doing here?" Harry asked, his eyebrows raised in surprise at finding the house elf in Hogwarts.

“Does not Harry Potter know?” Dobby asked, a bit sad, “Professor Dumbledore hired Dobby after Halloween. No one would hire a free elf for pay, but Dumbledore found Dobby and offered him work at Hogwarts. He offered me three galleons a month and weekends off, but Dobby haggled him down to two galleons and one weekend a month off.” Dobby said the last with pride.

“So this is Dobby,” Ginny said. She knelt down and offered her hand to the house elf, “Hi, Dobby. I’m Ginny Weasley, a good friend of Harry. I’ve heard so much about you and I’m glad to finally meet you.”

“Oh, what a great witch you are, Miss Wheezy,” Dobby said, eyeing her hand with tears in his eyes, “You are like the noble Harry Potter, befriending a worthless, lazy house elf like me.”

Harry shook his head and placed a hand on Dobby’s shoulder, “Now listen to me, Dobby. You are not worthless and lazy. You are my friend and I will not have anyone speak like that about my friend, not even you. Is that clear?”

Dobby nodded his head, “Oh, yes, Harry Potter. What can Dobby do for Harry Potter and Miss Wheezy?”

“Well, we did come here to have a little dinner,” Harry said, “can you get some food for us, Dobby? We’ll bring them to eat in our common room.”

Dobby nodded his head vigorously, “Of course, Harry Potter. But you and Miss Wheezy can eat here. There is a perfectly good table here.” He waved a hand and a table with two chairs appeared in front of them.

Harry looked at Ginny. *“What do you think, Ginny?”*

“Well, I guess we can, Harry. At least, we don’t have to take just sandwiches with us.”

Harry turned back to Dobby, “All right, Dobby. We’ll eat here. Oh, one more thing, call me Harry, just Harry. As I said before, you’re my friend and my friends just call me Harry.”

The house elf blinked tears from his eyes and hugged Harry again, "Oh, thank you, thank you, Harry, sir. You is so good to Dobby." He then backed away and ran off to get some food.

Harry shook his head, his face red with embarrassment over the enthusiastic house elf. Ginny giggled.

Harry extended his hand to Ginny, "Shall we, m'lady?"

Ginny giggled again, taking his hand, "Of course, my lord."

The two young people walked to the table, where Harry gallantly helped Ginny sit down."

Meanwhile, in the Headmaster's office, James, Molly, Arthur were seated around the desk, gazing at the figure of Sybil Trelawney recede into Dumbledore's pensieve. Dumbledore was seated in his usual chair behind the desk. Sirius and Remus were standing off to one side, grave expressions on their faces, while McGonagall was stiffly standing behind Dumbledore, her mouth a thin line.

Molly and Arthur slumped back in their chairs, evidently stunned.

Arthur looked at James and Dumbledore, "Are you sure Harry's the one mentioned?"

"At first, Arthur," Dumbledore said, "he was one of two possible children. But after Voldemort attacked James and his family, Harry became the one as Voldemort had marked him as his equal. Now that Voldemort has returned, it will only be a matter of time before Harry has to face him, a confrontation only one of them will walk away from."

Molly soon had tears flowing down his cheek, "That poor boy!" she wailed, "My poor Ginny." She turned to collapse in Arthur's arms.

As he comforted his wife, Arthur looked at Dumbledore, "Albus, are you sure that V-v-You-know-Who is back?"

"Yes, Arthur," Dumbledore said, his voice heavy with worry, "I'm afraid he is. All the signs are there. I had hoped he would not recover

his body and his powers for a few more years, enough time for Harry to get ready while enjoying his school years.”

“Albus,” Arthur said, “What will being bonded with Harry mean for Ginny, in the light of this?”

“Well, Arthur,” Dumbledore said, “on one hand, she will give Harry far more power than he would have by himself. Hopefully, it will be enough to let him defeat Voldemort for good. On the other hand, it means Ginny will most likely be right beside Harry in the coming war. And if Harry is somehow defeated, she will not survive him long.”

“Albus!” Molly said, “I will not allow my daughter to be part of this if that may happen.”

Dumbledore sighed, “It’s a bit too late for that, Molly. Once she bonded to Harry, she became part of his destiny.”

“Molly,” Arthur said, “Knowing your daughter as you do, do you honestly think you can keep her away from Harry now?”

Molly shook her head, tears again flowing down her cheeks.

“How does Harry cope with it?” Arthur asked.

James looked sheepishly at him, “Er, he doesn’t know about the Prophecy yet.”

“JAMES POTTER!” Molly shouted as she jumped out of her chair, drew her wand and advanced on the auror, causing James to leap out of his own chair, “How could you keep something like this from your own son? I should hex you just on principle.”

James backed up against the wall as Molly closed on him. Boy, she and Lily were really scaring when angry.

“Er, I didn’t want him to be bothered by the Prophecy, Molly,” he said, “We wanted him to have a normal childhood before thinking about it. We all thought that there would be time to deal with Voldemort once Harry had finished school.”

“Who is ‘we’, James?” Arthur asked.

“Um, Lily and me,” James said, “with the agreement of Albus.”

Molly turned around and pointed her wand at Dumbledore, “How could you make such a grave error in judgment, Albus? How could you keep such a thing secret from Harry?”

Dumbledore sighed, “I’m afraid, Molly, that just point out that I am human like the rest of us, capable of making mistakes.”

The room became silent for several minutes. Finally, Remus spoke up, “Well, we’re pretty sure now that Voldemort is back. What do we do, Albus?”

“We’ll have to go back to what we were doing before Harry defeated him, Remus,” Dumbledore said, sitting up straight and looking at them, “I’m reforming the Order. You, Arthur, James and Sirius find as many of the old crowd as you can find. For now just tell them that they are needed again to battle evil from the shadows. We will need a base of operations other than Hogwarts. I don’t want to place the students here in danger. Sirius, could we use your house?”

“Um, I guess so, Albus,” Sirius said, “However, Ti will be going there for the summer vacation. What do we do then?”

“Ah, I believe he may want to visit his friends for the summer,” Dumbledore said, “I’m sure Harry and Rose will be happy to have him come over, right, James?”

James smiled, “I believe so, Albus.”

“Speaking of Harry,” Arthur said, “Now that V-v-voldemort is back, Harry will need to be prepared to eventually fight him.”

“Don’t worry, Arthur,” James said, “I’ve already started giving him some extra training since last summer. I think the twins, Ron and Ginny have been joining them especially in learning muggle martial arts. I think we’ll step up his work this summer and include the others in the spell work, especially Ginny. Sirius and I will make a program to help Harry and Ginny harness their combined strength.”

“Will it be enough, James?” Molly asked, “Will it be enough so Harry can win and live? I don’t want to lose my daughter.”

James stepped up to the Weasley matriarch, a determined look in his eyes, “I’ll make a promise to you, Molly. You know a Potter never breaks his promise. I promise you that I will make sure Harry is ready to fight Voldemort when the time comes; fight him, win and live so that he and Ginny can give us plenty of grandchildren to spoil.”

Chapter 39: The end of another school year

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

(from Rose's P.O.V.)

The next morning, Rose watched as Harry and Ginny entered the Great Hall together. She noticed that everyone stopped eating the moment the young couple stepped up to the Doors.

For days after the attack of Wormtail, many people had come up to her and Harry's other friends, asking where he and Ginny were. Even she and Ginny's dorm mates, Melinda and Lisa, asked about them. Finally, she threatened to hex the next person who badgered her.

Rose sighed as she watched Harry and Ginny walk toward the Gryffindor table, ignoring the low murmuring of whispers and the eyes following them.

Her brother had never had it easy. For as long as she could remember, Harry had been hounded, stared at, pointed at, whispered about and printed about. Sometimes, she felt jealous of all the attention he got as the bloody Boy-who-Lived. But most of the time, she felt bad for her older brother, bad that people couldn't leave him alone, give him the privacy she knew he craved. This was such a time.

She forced a smile as they sat beside her, "Hey, bro. Hi, Ginny. How are you guys this morning."

"We're okay, sis," Harry said, in a low voice, "though it looks like we should have come down to breakfast earlier, when there were fewer people to stare at us."

"Don't mind them, Harry," Ginny said, "Let's just eat. I'm starving and we only have a half hour to class."

Rose giggled, "Oh, you are definitely a Weasley, Ginny. Even being with my brother can't distract you from your stomach."

Ginny gave her a mock glare, "Don't you start. I'm a growing girl." She turned to Harry, who was probably speaking to her mentally. She suddenly blushed and hit him playfully in the arm.

Rose felt a little strange, watching their mental exchange. She wondered what Harry had said to her to make her blush like that. Then again, maybe she didn't want to know, after all he was her brother and Ginny was her best friend.

She noticed that Hermione and the twins were watching them with amused expressions. As usual, Ron was too busy stuffing his face to notice.

Then, a voice beside her softly said, "You know, I don't think I'll get used to seeing them like that, even after knowing exactly what they're doing."

Rose looked to her right and locked her hazel eyes with the dark brown eyes of Neville Longbottom, who she found was seated next to her. She started to feel her cheeks heat up as she stared at him for a full three seconds. His face had lost most of the fat from the last two years, making him quite good looking.

Quickly turning away, she said, "Er, I don't know if I could either, get used to them like that, I mean." She could see the questioning look on Neville's face out of the corner of her eye.

"Er, have you tried the scones?" she said, not looking at him, "they're still warm."

"Um, okay," Neville said, still looking strangely at her, "I'll try some." He reached over and got one, buttering it.

Rose continued to eat, turning her attention to watching Harry and Ginny as they ate, one handed. Finally, the school bell rang, indicating it was time to head for the day's first class.

Rose quickly wiped her mouth and stood up. She turned to Ginny, "Come on, Ginny. It's time for class. You've got a week's work to catch up on. You can see my brother later." She leaned closer to her

friend, "Anyway, you can still talk to each other wherever you are," she whispered.

With a sigh, Ginny got up, gave Harry a peck on the cheek and moved to her side.

Rose looked back at Neville for a split second. Thankfully, he was talking with Seamus Finnegan. She then left the Great Hall with Ginny, headed for the Dungeons.

Later that night, Rose was lying down in her bed, thinking of the day that had gone by. *What was I thinking, staring at him like that? It's like I was one of those fangirls who subscribe to Witch Weekly. Thank Merlin he doesn't know I sent that Valentine card to him last year. It was terrible when that dwarf tackled him. How could I have done that?*

She turned over and hit her pillow in frustration. *I thought I was over him after that. But, lately, I've blushed every time I see him. What do I do? Thank Merlin we stopped those early morning workouts, so I only see him at meal times and in the Common Room. Maybe I should eat earlier.* She turned over again and fell back on her pillow with a sigh. *Why did I have to develop a crush on Neville, bloody Longbottom. He probably just thinks of me as Harry's little sister.*

Once more, she turned on to her stomach and smirked into her pillow. *At least, it's not Ron. Eww, imagine what Ginny would think of that. On top of that, there are these visions. Why is it I see events of little importance? Why didn't I see what happened to Ginny? Agghhh! I really need to talk to someone about it. But not Ginny, Harry will find out and I don't want him to yet.* She thought about who she could talk to. *Of course,* she thought, *"who else to talk to but Gryffindor's own resident genius, Hermione Granger. I'll talk to her. She'll be able to keep it a secret. Together, we can figure this out.* With that thought, Rose fell asleep.

March soon passed into April, with the two week Easter holidays starting in the last week of March. Harry insisted that he and his friends resume their early morning workouts and martial arts sparring. Rose was reluctant to continue, much to the surprise of Harry and Ginny but she eventually agreed to join them.

To celebrate the twins' 16th birthday, the New Marauders charmed the Slytherin Common Room and dorms bright pink. Snape was furious but had no proof as to who the perpetrators were. It took him three days to undo the charm.

A few days after Easter, Hermione received wonderful news. Her mother had given birth to a boy. Her parents had named him Daniel Anthony Granger. Hermione was ecstatic. Her friends all offered their congratulations. Dumbledore allowed her to go home for the weekend to see her new brother.

The third Saturday of April was the Quidditch finals match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. Slytherin was already out of the running due to Harry's spectacular catch of the snitch in the match played on the Saturday before Valentine's day.

Harry woke up that day to a lovely spring dawn peeking through the windows of Gryffindor Tower, perfect flying weather. He reached out with his mind and found Ginny still asleep. He smiled and got up to get ready.

As he bounded into the Gryffindor Common Room, he felt her finally stir.

"Good morning, Ginny,"

"Good morning, Harry. Are you ready for the game?"

Harry gave a nervous laugh in his mind, *"I guess. Nice weather for flying, though."*

"Go on and have breakfast," she told him, *"You'll need it. I'll catch up with you in the Great Hall."*

"All right, Gin. I'll see you in a bit."

He went to the Great Hall and found the rest of the team already sitting down at their table. Oliver Wood turned around to see him

"Finally," the seventh year said, "It's good you showed up, Harry. You'll need a lot of energy to keep up with the Ravenclaw seeker, Cho Chang. Even though she's a fourth year, she's as small as you."

Harry said, "All right, all right." He started putting some eggs and bacon on his plate. He forced himself to place it in his mouth and swallow, in spite of the churning in his stomach from the usual nervousness he felt before a game.

"Eat slowly, Harry." Ginny's voice sounded in his head, "you'll be able to keep it in. You do need your strength."

"I know, Ginny. I'm trying. I'll be better after I'm up in the air. Are you coming down soon?"

"In a bit, Harry. I'm just waiting for Rose. However, from the looks of Wood, I think you'll be going to the Pitch early for his usual pep talk."

Harry groaned in his mind.

Sure enough, 10 minutes later, Oliver stood up from the table and turned to the rest of the team, "All right. Let's get going to the Quidditch Pitch. We need to get ready."

Fred turned to him, "Oi, Oliver! We still have more than an hour before the game. What's the rush?" Of course, after three years with Wood, he knew his appeal was useless.

"Well," Oliver answered, "We need all that time. Come on, everybody up."

Grumbling, the Gryffindor team exited the Great Hall and walked across the grounds to the Pitch. They changed to their uniforms in the lockers. Then, Wood made them sit down and started to give them a speech on how this match was the most important of the year and it was also his last as he was finishing Hogwarts. He droned on and on, causing Harry to get drowsy.

Harry was awakened by Fred nudging him in the ribs, "Harry, it's time, mate."

As the teams moved onto the Quidditch field, Harry heard Lee Jordan's voice call out each of the team members' names. Madame Hooch signaled the start of the match, and they were off.

Harry immediately took a position a hundred feet above the Pitch, taking note of the action while searching for the pitch. A little ways below him, he saw the Ravenclaw seeker, Cho Chang, who seemed to be watching him.

So that's Cho Chang, he thought idly as he gazed at the Asian girl. She's pretty, but not as pretty as Ginny.

"My, my, Mr. Potter, you should get a reward for that last remark," he heard Ginny say in his mind, "Just wait until after the game. Now, catch the snitch. It'll be lunch soon."

"Yes, *ma'am*." Harry smirked. He started looking for the snitch even more intently, ignoring Cho, much to Ginny's satisfaction.

Even then, the match dragged on. After two hours, Harry chanced a glance at the score. It was 130-50 in favor of Gryffindor.

Suddenly Ginny shouted in Harry's mind, *"Harry! Over to your right, about 50 feet above you!"*

Harry looked quickly where she indicated and saw the snitch, floating in the middle of the Pitch. Unfortunately, Cho Chang saw it as well and she was already speeding for it.

Harry flattened himself against the shaft of his Nimbus and sped after her, urging it faster. He soon came up right beside the older girl. They were neck and neck as they chased the snitch which sped away from them towards the Gryffindor goal hoops.

As Harry and Cho neared the Gryffindor hoops, Harry could see Wood was shouting.

"Don't let her get it, Potter!" he cried, "Forger being a gentleman!"

That last part horrified Harry. He surely couldn't push a girl around.

“Do what Wood says, Harry!” Ginny shouted into his mind, causing him to flinch, *“Get that snitch any way you can!”*

“Bloody hell,” he muttered and starting elbowing Cho aside. He stretched as his Nimbus finally overtook Cho’s broom. Then, he felt the feathery touch of the fluttering golden ball and closed his fist around it.

“HARRY POTTER CATCHES THE SNITCH!” Lee Jordan cried, “GRYFFINDOR WINS! GRYFFINDOR IS THE QUIDDITCH CHAMP!”

Harry flew down towards Wood. The rest of the team streaked towards them and they all met together by the Gryffindor goal hoops.

Pandemonium broke out as the rest of their house poured onto the Pitch. They started hoisting the team onto their shoulders. Harry scanned the crowd, searching for his girlfriend. He felt her presence nearby. Then he spotted her red hair as she ran up to the team. Harry immediately jumped down from their supporters.

Ginny then leaped at him, laughing both out loud and in their shared mental link. Then she kissed him, hard. Whistles and catcalls sounded out around them. Both of them blushed.

The party that followed took all day and lasted up to midnight, when McGonagall came up in a tartan dressing gown and demanded that everyone go to bed.

The following Sunday, Harry, Rose and their friends went to Potter Manor for the christening of the Potter twins. They went to a small church just outside of London for the ceremony. Frank Longbottom stood as Andrew’s godfather while Arthur Weasley stood as Daisy’s godfather. Molly stood as Andrew’s godmother.

Surprisingly, Sam Turgis turned up and stood as godmother to Daisy. Even more surprising was that she arrived at the church walking hand in hand with Sirius. Harry couldn’t help but smile at the goofy grin on his godfather’s face.

They all went to Potter Manor for a good lunch to celebrate the day's event. Harry, Ginny, Rose and Hermione spent most of the time with the twins who were well behaved throughout the affair.

Another surprise of the day for Harry was seeing Ron and Ti talking during lunch. From the smile on Ron's face and his wild gesturing, Harry thought they were discussing their mutual interest in the Chuddley Cannons. He noticed that Ti's smile seemed a bit forced but decided it was just because he was still uncomfortable around Ron.

After that day, the days passed quickly in a flurry of classes and meals as the school year wound down toward the end of term exams which were set for the first week of June. The teachers all seemed to band together to keep them busy with tons of homework and class assignments.

Harry thanked all the known deities and Merlin for the Bond as he and Ginny seldom got time to spend with each other during those hectic weeks of revising and doing homework. It allowed them to talk with each other even when separated by several floors.

One thing he did notice was that Snape seemed a bit tired at times. He occasionally saw the potions professor rubbing his left arm again. Harry wondered about that but the pressure of studying drove it out of his mind.

On the first Sunday of June, the day before the start of exams, Harry and his friends came down to the Great Hall as usual for breakfast. As they sat down, they noticed a commotion at the Slytherin table.

Harry looked over and saw several people talking to Draco, who was actually beaming.

Wonder what's up with the git. He seems too happy for it to be good.

"You're right, Harry," Ginny said in his mind, "He does seem very happy about something."

Just then, a large owl, similar to Artemis, swooped down and dropped a package onto Draco's lap. Draco's smile grew wider when he had

opened the package to show a set of dragon hide boots. He turned to look at someone at the Gryffindor table, a smirk on his face.

Harry turned to see who Draco was looking at. It was Ti who was seated a couple of places from him. The expression on Ti's face was one of sadness and longing, which surprised Harry.

"Hey, Ti," Harry said, "what's wrong? What's the matter?"

Ti turned to Harry for a moment before looking down at his plate, "Nothing, Harry. It's nothing."

Harry got up and moved to sit down beside Ti, placing a hand gently on his shoulder.

"I don't think it's nothing, Ti," Harry said softly, "If it has something to do with your ex-brother, then it has to be something. Why is Draco so happy? He seems to be taunting you."

Ti sighed, "Well, um, he's happy 'cause it's his birthday."

"Oh?" Harry said, "then that owl just delivered..."

"...his birthday present," Ti said, sighing again, "That's the Malfoy family eagle owl, Caesar."

"If it's his birthday," Harry said, "why would he be taunting you? Wait, a minute, Ti. When **is** your birthday?"

"Er, um," Ti said, "April 24th." He looked down at the table again.

"What!" Harry said, a bit loud. He felt Ginny's surprise and dismay double his own. He realized that that had been the day of the twins' christening.

Their other friends looked at them, wondering what was going on.

Ginny got up from where she had been sitting beside Harry's previous place and moved to sit on Ti's other side.

"Why didn't you tell us, Ti?" Ginny said, softly, "We should have known."

“That’s okay,” Ti said, forcing a smile, “It was the christening of Harry and Rose’s new brother and sister. I didn’t want to bother anyone. I just pretended the party was also for me.”

Harry squeezed Ti’s shoulder gently, “It’s not okay, Ti. You’re our friend. We would have celebrated your birthday at dinner.”

By now, the other New Marauders had come up to them.

“Hey, Harry, Ti,” Neville asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nev, I’m afraid we’ve been terrible friends to Ti,” Harry said, “it seems we forgot his birthday. It was April 24.”

“Oh, my,” Rose said, “Ti, why didn’t you say anything?”

Ti looked down at the table again, “I just didn’t want anyone to make a fuss.”

“Nonsense,” Hermione said, “A birthday should be celebrated with family and friends.”

“Exactly,” Harry said, “we need to make it up to you, Ti.” He turned to the others, his voice lowering, “Plus, it seems to be Draco’s birthday. I can’t think of a better belated present to Ti than to give Draco a special present.”

The others looked at each other, smirks breaking out on their faces.

“Ooh, I like that,” Fred said.

“Definitely,” George said, “what’s the plan, Harry?”

“Come on,” Harry said, beckoning to the doors. He turned to Rose, “Sis, please get the Map. We need a place for some private planning.”

He got up and headed for the doors exiting the Great Hall, his friends gathered around him, including Ti. They ignored the smirk on Draco’s face as they walked by.

That evening, as the students gathered for dinner, Harry and his friends were waiting for something to happen.

Dumbledore stood up and said, "Tuck in."

As the students began eating, Draco suddenly got up and jumped onto the table. A puff of smoke covered him momentarily. When it cleared, he was a she, dressed in a low cut dress, with long blonde hair, makeup and breasts the size of melons.

He/she started singing "I am pretty, oh so pretty," in a surprisingly good voice.

Laughter rang throughout the Hall, plus some catcalls from the older students.

Draco sang the whole song then jumped down from the table and ran toward the Head Table. Once there, he/she knelt in front of Snape, proclaiming his/her undying love and begged him to marry him/her.

Snape looked torn between horror, disgust and anger. Finally, he wiped out his wand and yelled, "Finite Incantum."

Draco changed back to normal. He stared wide-eyed around him as laughter continued to sound around the Hall. After a few seconds, he bolted from the Great Hall.

Harry and his friends were laughing hard, especially Ti. Harry felt a slight pressure on his mind. He looked up at the teacher's table and saw Snape staring malevolently at him. Harry shrugged his shoulders as the rest of the students settled down to eat again.

Later, the New Marauders trailed behind the rest of their House, discussing the prank in low voices.

"I really liked that part about him proposing marriage to Snape," Ron said.

"Yeah, that was hilarious," Rose said, grinning. She turned to Ti, "that was a good idea, Ti."

Ti smiled, "Well, I thought it fitting as he's Draco's godfather. I certainly don't want him married to Professor Lupin or Professor Dumbledore." He shuddered.

They all laughed. By now, they were in front of the Fat Lady's portrait.

"Hey," Ti said, "where are Fred and George?"

"Oh, they're around here somewhere," Harry answered, vaguely, "Go on, Ti. Let's get inside."

"Okay," Ti said, turning to the Fat Lady to give the password, "Lions are King." She smiled as she swung her portrait open.

As soon as Ti stepped inside, a great cry of "Surprise!" sounded in the Gryffindor Common Room.

Ti stared wide-eyed as he beheld the brightly decorated room with a banner saying "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, TI!" strung over the fireplace.

He turned to his friends, tears in his eyes, "You, you did this?"

"Yeah," Harry said, "we figured it's a great reason to have a party. We're sorry we didn't know earlier. Come on, everyone wants to greet you."

Ti moved deeper into the room where the rest of the House crowded in to greet him, causing the young boy to grin.

A table in one corner was groaning with all sorts of food and several cases of butterbeer and jugs of pumpkin juice.

Harry steered Ti toward the fireplace where a pile of brightly colored packages lay on a small table. The rest of the New Marauders followed them.

"Wha-what's this?" Ti asked as he stared at the pile.

"They're your birthday presents," Harry said, a smile on his face.

"But, but, how did you...." Ti stammered, tears of joy forming in his eyes.

“Ah, that my boy is a secret,” Fred said, grinning.

“...you don’t need to know,” George said, grinning like his twin.

“Come on, Ti,” Rose said, “open them.”

Ti opened the gifts slowly, carefully handling each revealed present like they were made out of glass.

Harry and Ginny gave him a wand holster for his wrist. Ron gave him a shirt with the Chudley Cannons logo on it and a wizard picture of a chaser on the back. Hermione gave him a book called “The Black family history”. Rose and Neville each gave him a bunch of Honeyduke’s chocolates and candy. The twins gave him a bunch of Zonko’s joke products. Some gifts apparently had been sent in from people outside Hogwarts. He got a cake from Mrs. Weasley and a set of dragonhide boots from Harry’s parents.

There was also a gift from Sirius. When Ti opened it, he gasped. Tears started to flow from his eyes.

“What is it, Ti?” Rose asked.

Ti showed her the gift. It was a wizarding picture of him and Sirius, one taken at Christmas.

Harry placed a hand on Ti’s shoulder, “Sirius wanted to come but there was some sort of emergency and they needed him. He said he wanted you to have a picture of the two of you to place by your bed.”

“Now this is the best gift I’ve ever had,” he said, “in fact, this is the best birthday I’ve ever had. Thank you.” He turned to look at all his friends, “Thank you all.”

“You’re welcome, Ti,” Harry said, smiling, “Like I said before, you’re family.”

Needless to say, the party lasted up to midnight. Not even McGonagall, who came by at 9pm to greet Ti, called a halt to the celebration.

The week of exams flew by quickly. Harry again thanked Merlin for the Bond since it allowed him to tune Hermione out by talking to Ginny whenever his bushyhaired friend ranted over her answers after each test. He was puzzled that Fred and George didn't study as hard as their fellow 5th years, in spite of it being their O.W.L. exams. Percy had locked himself in his Head boy's room in between his exams as it was his N.E.W.T.S year.

The New Marauders spent week after exams generally having fun together and playing pranks on the Slytherins, especially Draco. Try as he might, Snape couldn't catch them or prove that Harry and his friends were responsible. Dumbledore simply smiled whenever the potions professor complained to him.

Strangely, Harry noticed that Rose and Hermione seemed to spend time in the Library even after exams. He wasn't too surprised about Hermione, but wondered if his sister was taking after his friend.

When the final grades of the year were announced, Harry and his friends were all relieved that they had passed. Of course, Fred, George and Percy wouldn't get their results until July.

The end of year feast was as great as ever. The students and teachers were almost finished eating when there was a bright flash from the ceiling.

Everyone looked up and someone screamed. Overlapping and partially covering the stars on the Great Hall's ceiling were streams of differently colored lights. They undulated like ribbons across the magical sky. They formed patterns like animals, magical creatures and even faces of the Staff. Everyone laughed as they saw Snape's face in blood red, Dumbledore's in purple, McGonagall's in blue and Hagrid's in yellow. Then the ribbons of light disappeared.

For a moment, it looked like the show was over. Suddenly there were brightly colored explosions like fireworks, forming different patterns. For more than twenty minutes, this continued. The students oohed and aahed in the right places. Then there was one very bright flash of white light. When the light cleared, words spelled in letters of different colors formed on the ceiling.

This magnificent show was brought

to you by the

New Marauders

as a tribute to the past year.

Enjoy your summer.

Till next year.

The Hall broke out in cheers and thunderous applause. Harry and his friends looked at each other as they joined in the applause, bright smiles on their faces. Even Draco had seemed impressed.

Harry glanced at the Head Table. All the professors were smiling except, of course, for Snape, though he didn't exactly scowl either. Remus was actually grinning. Harry then caught Dumbledore's eye. The Headmaster smiled and raised his glass in silent praise.

Harry grinned and he and Ginny agreed mentally that it was a great way to end the year.

Chapter 40: Back home for the summer

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

Harry looked out the window at the scenery as the Hogwarts Express rushed through the countryside towards London and King's Cross Station. He then looked down at the mass of red hair that was pressed against his chest and smiled. His arms were wrapped protectively around Ginny as she slept contentedly.

Across from him, Ron and Neville were involved in a game of wizard chess, though Ron would occasionally look up at him and Ginny and shake his head, a bemused smile on his face. Ti was seated on the same bench as Harry and Ginny leaning against the compartment door, also fast asleep.

Rose and Hermione were talking in quiet tones. They've been like that since getting on the train. They didn't even get anything from the food trolley for lunch.

Harry wondered what was up with them. His sisters were acting strangely. Harry took a moment to analyze part of that thought. *'His sisters: Rose and Hermione.'* He mentally shrugged. Even if they weren't related, Hermione was as close to him as Rose. Well, what ever they were up to, he hoped they'd tell him soon. He didn't want to pry. Rose's temper was the equal of their mother and Ginny's. As he lazily continued to watch Ron and Neville's game, his eyes drifted shut and he also fell asleep.

The next thing he knew, Ginny was calling to him in his mind.

"Harry, wake up. We're at the Platform. Come on, sweetie, wake up."

Harry groggily opened his eyes to see Ginny staring at him, a smile on her face. He loved staring at her chocolate brown eyes.

"What did you call me?" he groggily asked, a smile also forming on his face, "Sweetie?"

"Well, what of it?" Ginny said, *"I thought you'd like it?"*

"Oh, I do," he said to her mentally, *"I really do. I also like waking up to see your face as the first thing in the morning."*

Ginny laughed, "Well, it isn't morning anymore, silly. *But I also like seeing you that way.*"

"Hey, will you guys get a move on," Ron said suddenly from the door of the compartment, "We have to get on home."

Ginny turned angrily to him, "Oooh, sometimes, Ron, you can be such an insensitive git. We're coming." She grabbed Harry's hand, pulled him up and she moved out of the compartment, pushing Ron aside at the same time. Harry could feel her anger and hear her grumbling mentally.

Ron looked at Harry with a questioning look but Harry just shook his head and grabbed his and Ginny's trunks. Ron followed them grumbling about mental sisters.

When Harry stepped off the train just behind Ginny, he scanned the Platform for signs of his parents. After a few seconds, he saw his mother standing beside the Weasleys, showing them one of the twins. Rose was already beside her, taking the other twin from Remus. Harry reached for Ginny's hand and together they walked towards their families.

Lily smiled as her son and Ginny came up to her, "Hi, you two," she said. She embraced each of them with one hand then gazed at Ginny, "So, Ginny, have you been taking good care of my boy?"

Ginny grinned and said, "Yes, Mrs. Potter. I sure am."

"Aw, Mum," Harry said, his face turning red, "cut that out."

Lily laughed, "Come now, Harry. It isn't everyday I get to wind up my son up about his girlfriend. Now, calling someone 'your girlfriend' at your age is something I have to get used to."

She turned to Ginny, "Ginny, you should start learning to call me 'Lily' since James has already asked you to call him by his first name. In a

few years, you'll be calling 'Mum' as well, considering that other thing you and Harry share."

When Harry and Ginny exchanged a worried look, she added in a whisper, "Yes, James has already told me about the Bond. Don't worry about it. I'm happy to have another girl in the family." Her smile reassured Harry and Ginny.

Harry looked at the baby in his mother's arms, "Hey, Daisy, how are you?" he cooed at her, "Give your big brother a smile."

Daisy gurgled at him, a smile on her tiny face.

"I think she's grown a bit since she was born," Ginny said, "hasn't she, Harry?"

"You're probably right, Gin," Harry said, smiling as he turned his attention to his baby brother, "Hi, Andrew, how's my baby brother doing? I bet you're going to be as great at Quidditch as me."

"Oh, yeah, right," Rose said, "the youngest seeker in the next century."

Harry scowled but placed a smile on his face as Molly hugged him.

"Hello, Harry, dear," Molly said, "I hope Ginny hasn't been too much for you."

"No, Mrs....er, Molly," Harry said, smiling at Ginny, "she's been perfect."

Ginny blushed, *"Harry! Don't embarrass me like that."*

"Turn around is fair play, Ginny," he said to her, laughing in his mind, *"You with my mum and me with your mum."*

"Oooh," she said back, *"Just go on like that and I may not speak to you the entire summer."*

"Oh, right. I doubt you'd last a day. I know I can't," he said.

Ginny's eyebrows rose in surprise at his admission then she smiled, *"All right, I guess I deserved that."*

"All right, Harry, Rose," Lily said, "we need to get back to the Manor. It's almost time for the twins' next feeding."

Ti then came up to them, "Um, Mrs. Potter, where's Sirius?"

"Oh, Ti, I'm sorry," Lily said, "I almost forgot. You're coming back with us. Sirius couldn't get off work to pick you up. I thought he had sent you an owl. He'll pick you up from Potter Manor this evening."

Ti frowned, "Okay, Mrs. Potter." A sad look formed on his face.

Harry placed a hand on Ti's shoulder, "Don't worry, Ti. He just probably forgot to send the owl."

"That's true, Ti," Lily said, smiling at the young boy, "When he's working, Sirius tends to forget a lot of things. Plus, he's just getting used to being someone's guardian. Give it time."

Ti attempted to smile but his eyes widened for a moment when he saw something behind the Potters. A sad look then formed on his face.

Harry turned around and saw that Ti was looking at Draco and his mother.

The two Malfoys were with Draco's cronies and two men who looked so much like older versions of Crabbe and Goyle that Harry assumed that they were their fathers.

Narcissa spotted Ti and her facial expression changed to one of sad longing for a second, one that was so similar to Ti's own expression. But hers became neutral and she and Draco walked off without any other indication that they had seen Ti and the Potters.

Harry scowled and said to Ti, "Forget about them, Ti. They're no longer your family. We and Sirius are your family now and we're happy to have you."

Ti nodded though remained silent as he walked toward the barrier with the Potters.

Harry sighed and exchanged a sad look with Ginny.

As they walked on, Harry noticed something and he turned to his mother, "Mum, where's Dad? I noticed there seem to be a lot of Aurors around."

Lily sighed and whispered, "He's around here somewhere, coordinating security. There are more Aurors to protect the students."

"Why?" Harry asked, his eyes narrowing, "What's happened?"

"Not here, Harry," Lily said, "Wait until we get home, please."

When they were near the barrier to Muggle London, Harry and Ginny said goodbye with a huge hug and gentle kiss, knowing they would be able to talk to each other later in spite of the distance between the Burrow and Potter Manor.

Harry said goodbye to Hermione, Neville, Ron and the rest of the Weasley family. Rose and Ti also said goodbye to their friends. Harry raised one eyebrow when he noticed the shy way Rose said goodbye to Neville.

As the Potters exited the station, a large car pulled up beside them. When the window on the driver's side rolled down, Harry was surprised to see his father sitting there, behind the wheel. He didn't know his father could drive.

"Come on, everyone, hurry up," James said, "Harry, place the trunks in the boot, quickly."

Harry did as he was told and everyone piled into the car. Within an hour, they were approaching the gate to the house and grounds of Potter Manor.

Harry was surprised to see flat, empty land where the Manor should be. He turned to his father, a question on his face.

“Dumbledore has placed the house under a Fidelius Charm, Harry,” James said, “I’m the secret keeper. I’ll tell you why once we’re inside.”

Once they were in front of where the house should be, James showed them all a piece of parchment with the place’s address on it. The house then appeared in all its glory.

They entered quickly. Once inside, James had the three kids sit in the living room and sat down in front of them. Lily took the twins up to their room.

“All right,” James said, “I want you all to understand what I’m going to say is considered top secret by the Ministry. I’m not happy about it but I can’t do anything about it.”

“Come on, Dad,” Harry said, “what is it?”

“Well, Harry,” James said, “you see, three weeks ago, while you and Ginny were unconscious in the Hospital Wing, there was a massive breakout from Azkaban. All of Voldemort’s followers escaped.”

Harry eyes’ widened, “What about the Dementors and all the guards you had there?” He felt Ginny react as well, letting him know that she, too, was receiving the same troubling information.

James sighed, “It appears that the Dementors never really came back to our side. They attacked the guards there, giving most of them the Kiss before they could fight back. Then, the Dementors freed all the Death Eaters who were held there.” He looked at Ti, “including the Lestranges.”

Ti and Rose were both wide-eyed now.

“Unfortunately, the Minister is trying to keep the breakout a secret,” James said, leaning back in his chair, a tired look now on his face, “He said he wants to prevent a panic.”

Harry felt Ginny’s anger and disbelief, which mirrored his own, “That’s a whole lot of bull,” he said, angrily, “If the public knew, they could protect themselves. Dad, you can’t go along with this.”

James sighed, "I wish I didn't have to, Harry. But if I didn't, I may lose my job. I know we don't need the money, but without me there, who knows what stupidity Fudge will have the Aurors do. I have to stay in his good graces for now."

"Yeah?" Harry said, his voice steadily rising, "well, I don't!" The last word was shouted. The two vases on the fireplace mantle shattered.

"Harry, please calm down," James said, "Be reasonable. As far as Fudge is concerned, this is just some random Death Eater activity."

"Random?" Harry said, "How the hell can it be random? How can he say that? When was the last time there was any Death eater activity? Not since I was a year old, I'll bet. And now the entire group of Death Eaters miraculously breaks out of Azkaban with the Dementors in tow. Who do they think could be capable of that? Merlin! What an idiot he is?" He then stood up, "This is too much crap to handle."

He ran up the stairs to the second floor and into his bedroom. He threw himself onto his bed. He could feel Ginny's own outrage and anger at Fudge.

How can he go along with that bastard? He probably doesn't believe Voldemort's back. Then my own father goes along with the crap he had going.

These thoughts kept circling in his mind. Slowly, his eyelids got heavy and he fell asleep.

Hours later, he felt a hand gently brush his cheek, waking him. He opened his eyes to find Ginny staring down at him.

"Gin," he said, "what are you doing here?"

"I came over to make sure you were all right," she said, giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

"What, what time is it?" he asked her as he looked around. Sunlight was streaming through his bedroom window.

"It's ten in the morning," she told him, "You slept through the night. Your parents decided to let you sleep the night away but called me when you didn't wake up yet."

Harry scowled, "How could he do that, Ginny? How can my father go along with the damned cover-up Fudge wants?"

Ginny took Harry's hand in hers and gave it a gentle squeeze, "I guess he's doing what he needs to in order to stay where he is, Harry. We're going to need someone reliable leading the Aurors. I can't think of anyone else besides your father."

Harry thought about it for a moment and nodded, "I guess you're right. When Voldemort comes out of hiding and begins attacking people, we'll need the Aurors to be ready to fight him. Dad's the best choice to prepare them, as long as Fudge lets him."

He looked up at Ginny, *"And when did you get so wise?"* he said mentally, a smile on his face.

Ginny shrugged, *"I had a chance to think about it when you fell asleep,"* she answered, *"I also got to talk with my Dad and he explained some things."*

"Like what?" Harry asked as he sat up a little.

"Well," she said, "he said that the Ministry is still in a bit of turmoil over Madame Bones' disappearance. Fudge placed that Umbridge woman that Sirius mentioned in charge of the DMLE, and they're keeping a tight rein on the Aurors. Your Dad has an argument with her everyday. He barely got the approval for the Aurors to guard the Platform yesterday. If your dad wasn't where he is, my dad thinks the Aurors wouldn't be anywhere ready if V-voldemort attacks."

Harry shrugged, "Well, I guess your dad has a point. I just don't like the idea of denying the truth. I guess for now we'll see what happens next. I hope it isn't something horrible."

He then looked at Ginny. She was dressed in a light blue cotton blouse and denim shorts. Her creamy smooth legs extended under her from below the shorts. He had seldom seen so much of them.

Ginny raised one eyebrow, obviously catching his thoughts, *“Do you like what you see, Potter?”*

Harry’s face turned red at being caught in what he was thinking, *“Oh, um, yeah, very much.”* He gently placed one hand behind her head and the other on her waist as he rose to meet her lips with his.

When they separated after what seemed like hours, they were both short of breath. Before either of them could speak, someone knocked on the door. Rose peeked in a moment later.

“Hey, lovebirds,” she said, a smirk on her face, “Mum sent me up to check on you two. She wanted to know if Ginny managed to calm the raging beast down.”

“Ha, Ha,” Harry said, “Very funny, Rose. Now get out. We’re still talking.”

“Talking?” Rose said, with a raised eyebrow, “from the looks on your faces, I doubt you were just talking, bro. Of course, I won’t tell Mum that. Come on, you need to have some breakfast.” Her face darkened for a moment, “Dad wants to talk to you two.”

Harry and Ginny exchanged a look, both wondering what the Potter patriarch wanted and hoping it wasn’t something to do with their relationship.

“All right, Rose,” Ginny said, getting off the bed, “Let’s go down to the living room.” She turned to Harry as she reached the door, *“Get cleaned up first, Harry. The next time we kiss, I want you smelling really good.”*

Harry shook his head and got off the bed to get his clothes and shower.

Ten minutes later, he came down the stairs to find his Dad sitting in the living room, reading the Daily Prophet, a scowl on his face. He looked up at Harry.

“Have some breakfast first, son,” James said, “we can talk when your stomach’s full.”

Harry nodded, not speaking and entered the kitchen where he found Ginny and Rose eating. He joined them at the kitchen table.

As he sat down, he asked, "Hey, sis, where's Ti?"

"Sirius came by last night to pick him up, Harry," Rose said, "He asked me to say goodbye for him."

Harry felt bad for not being able to see Ti off or say hello to Sirius.

"Don't worry about it, Harry," Ginny said to him, mentally, *"Ti saw how upset you were last night. He'll understand."*

Harry smiled, *"Thanks, Gin. You have a way of making me feel better."*

"I'll always try, Harry, as long as you let me. Now, eat up so we can see what your Dad wants with us."

Once they had finished eating, Harry nodded to Ginny and they both got up and headed back to the living room where they sat in a couch opposite James. Ginny took hold of Harry's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, trying to ease the dread that they both felt.

James took note of the hard look in Harry's eyes and sighed, "Look, Harry, I know you're still upset by what I told you last night. I hope you'll understand some day why I'm allowing the Minister to do what he wants. Just trust me on this, please."

Harry looked at him for a moment then said, "Okay, Dad, I'll let it go for now. Ginny told me about some things her dad had said about why you're not fighting Fudge on this. I just hope it'll be enough when Voldemort decides to come out in the open."

James blew out a breath of relief, "I guess that'll do for now, Harry. But there is something else I need to talk to you two about."

"What is it, Dad?" Harry asked warily.

"Well, son," James said, "it's about the increase in magical power you and Ginny acquired when you captured Wormtail and what happened

after. The strength of the spells you cast was incredible based on the evidence. I've never seen a Reducto spell that could smash a four-poster bed to pieces and the Stunning spell that hit Wormtail knocked him out for a whole day. Er, I'm not sure if he was awake when he got the Kiss." He paused for a moment as he saw Harry stiffen then continued, "However, your mum and I and Ginny's parents were worried about the after effects. You two were unconscious for a full week after casting just one spell at that power."

"I guess falling asleep during a duel can be a problem," Harry said.

James gave him a wry grin, "You bet. Now, to counteract that and help you and Ginny control that power, Albus has agreed to help train the both of you to do that. Remus and I will also teach you more spells used by Aurors. We'll be starting tomorrow while Albus will start his part in August."

He turned to Ginny, "Ginny, we've spoken to your parents and they've given their permission for this training. You'll be coming here by floo every morning after breakfast."

Harry and Ginny exchanged a grin. They'd be able to spend more time with each other, more than they did at Hogwarts and more than they'd thought they would this summer.

James saw this and chuckled, "Now don't take this as permission from us to snog. I'm sure Albus will work you two hard."

The two kids turned red in embarrassment, causing James to laugh again.

"Uh, Dad," Harry said, "What about Rose, Ron, Hermione, Ti and Neville? Can they join us?"

"Sure, Harry," James said, "After the first couple of weeks, Rose and the others will probably be able to join you. We just need to get you and Ginny going"

"All right, Dad," Harry said.

After that, Ginny enjoyed a quiet walk with Harry around the gardens of Potter Manor before going home. Of course, they didn't spend all their time walking.

The next day, Dumbledore came over to Potter Manor while the Potters were having breakfast.

"Professor," Harry said, surprised, "Why are you here today? I thought we were starting our training with you in August."

Dumbledore smiled, "That was the plan initially, Harry. However, I've decided we can do my part of your training earlier. That way, you can start to learn the more powerful spells at an earlier date. However, to start my training, I need to measure your and Ginny's magical levels."

"Magical levels, sir?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"Yes, Harry," Dumbledore said, "As I'm sure you remember from your first year class in Charms, each wizard or witch has a level of magical power. This governs the complexity of the spells he or she can cast. Ordinarily, this level doesn't change. However, with the Bond, both your magic and Ginny's magic have increased tremendously. In order for me to effectively train the two of you, I must measure just how strong you both have gotten."

When Ginny arrived, she, Harry, Dumbledore and James moved to the Dueling Room on the third floor of the Manor. Once inside, Dumbledore cast both silencing charms and imperturbable charms. Then he turned back to Harry and Ginny.

"Now," he said, a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face, "we shall see how strong your magic has gotten. All you have to do is stand still. The spell I will cast will show your magical level as a light of a certain color. The light's color ranges from almost black for negligible magical ability, to red then purple, blue, green, yellow and, finally, white. Even the different colors have levels of brightness, with the brighter color being the stronger. A squib would show a very dark red color. Most wizards would show a bright purple to dark green color. To demonstrate, I'll do your father, first, Harry."

"All right, professor," Harry said, watching intently. Ginny was doing the same.

Dumbledore waved his wand over James and muttered something Harry couldn't hear well. A very bright green light enveloped James.

"See?" Dumbledore said, "James shows a more than average magical strength. Now, I will do myself."

Dumbledore waved his wand over himself and a very bright yellow, almost white light enveloped him.

Once the light faded, Dumbledore said, "Now, Miss Weasley, let's test you next."

"All right, professor," Ginny said, stepping up to Dumbledore.

The light that enveloped Ginny was a mixture of yellow and white, but whiter than Dumbledore's.

"Interesting," said Dumbledore, "Now, for you, Harry."

Harry stepped up to Dumbledore and the Headmaster again waved his wand. The light that came from Harry was bright white, almost blinding.

Dumbledore smiled, "That was very interesting." He looked thoughtful for a moment and said, "I have an idea." He looked at Harry and Ginny, "Now, I'd like the two of you to hold hands and concentrate. Just think of a spell. Don't say it out loud."

Harry and Ginny exchanged puzzled looks but followed Dumbledore's instructions.

"What spell should we think of, Gin?" Harry asked Ginny mentally.

"Um, let's think of the disarming charm, Harry?" Ginny replied.

"All right, Gin," Harry said. He turned to Dumbledore, "We're ready, Professor."

Dumbledore again waved his wand over the two children. This time, the light enveloped both of them and grew brighter and brighter until it was so blinding, no one could see clearly.

When the light had faded, James and Dumbledore both had looks of awe on their faces.

“Wow,” James said first after several minutes of silence, “Have you seen anything like it, Albus?”

“No, James,” Dumbledore said, “Never in my life have I seen such magical power. Even the books I read on the Soul Bond have not mentioned such a great increase in magical strength. As far as I know, a light of that brightness have been recorded only in two wizards.”

“Who were they, sir?” Harry asked, a bit afraid of the answer.

“Merlin and Godric Gryffindor, Harry,” Dumbledore said, with a smile on his face.

Harry and Ginny’s eyes widened and they looked at each other, clearly awed and terrified at the same time.

“Now,” Dumbledore said, softly, “I will help you both control that power, both individually and together. We will begin tomorrow. Luckily, your last two months of school did not require you to cast strong spells.” He gave a soft chuckle, “I’d hate to see the effects of that, then.”

He took his charms down and bid farewell to the three.

James was still looking in awe at his son and Ginny.

“Uh, Dad?” Harry broke in, “what do we do now?”

“Huh?” James said, “Oh, well, um, why don’t we bring Ginny up to speed with the spells I taught you last summer? You can practice, too. They’re of sufficient low power that you probably won’t do much damage.”

“Okay,” both kids agreed.

The rest of the morning and the afternoon were spent practicing shielding, stealth and first and second year spells. Harry and Ginny wondered what Dumbledore would do the next day to help them control their magic.

Chapter 41: Summer troubles

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

The following day, Dumbledore returned to find Ginny already waiting with Harry.

“Ah, excellent,” Dumbledore said, “You are ready.”

“As ready as we’ll ever be, Professor,” Harry said, his hand tightly clasped in Ginny’s. Both were nervous and excited at the same time.

The three of them moved to the Dueling Room where Dumbledore again cast wards over the room. Dumbledore then had the pair sit on the floor and taught them how to relax their minds and clear them.

Harry and Ginny found this brought their Bond to a new level of awareness and peace. It was like they were in a world of mist where they were the only people. Their magical auras outlined them in a halo of light almost too bright to look at.

Dumbledore had them concentrate on trying to control the brightness of that light. It took them two days to dim the light even a fraction. This exhausted them initially, but by the end of the week, they could alternately increase and decrease the brightness with little effect.

Harry and Ginny would then take walks around the Manor’s grounds after Dumbledore had left before Ginny had to go home.

Then, a week and a half after coming home, Harry came down for breakfast and found Rose alone in the kitchen. He had noticed that Rose had been sullen and quiet lately. He wondered what was up.

As he sat down, Harry said, “Morning, sis. How’ve you been?”

To his surprise, Rose looked at him with a sad expression on her face, “Okay, I guess,” she said with a shrug of her shoulders.

Harry looked at her skeptically, “You don’t look okay. What’s wrong? You’ve been so quiet lately. That’s just not like you.”

"No, I'm fine, really," she said again.

"No, you're not fine," Harry said, "Come on. It's me, Harry, your brother. You can tell me."

Her expression suddenly changed from one of sadness to one of anger, "You want to know what's wrong?" she shouted, as she stood up, knocking her chair back, "Fine! Ever since we were babies, Ginny and I have done everything together, went everywhere together. Now, since you two formed this Bond, we never spend time together. She's always with you. Even when we were in class, she could talk to you. I thought we could spend time together this summer. But ever since we got home, you're together the whole day with Dumbledore. Where does that leave me?" She then ran off, apparently headed for her room.

Harry sat there in shock, not understanding for a moment what had happened. Then he heard Ginny in his mind.

"Oh, Harry, what have we done? How could we have been so callous?" she asked.

"I, I, I don't know, Gin," Harry answered, *"I never thought Rose would react this way. I thought she was happy for us."*

"She was, Harry. We often talked about it in our dorm," Ginny said, *"I guess she's been lonely the past few days. This is the first time we haven't spent time with each other for more than a day."*

Harry sighed, *"So, how do we fix this, Gin? I don't want to lose my sister and I'm sure you don't want to lose your best friend over this."*

"No, I don't, Harry," Ginny said, *"Go talk to her. Apologize for neglecting her. I'll be there in a few minutes."*

"All right, Gin," Harry said, *"I'll see you. I don't want to have to choose between you and our Bond and Rose."*

"Neither do I, Harry," Ginny said, *"I love you both, just in different ways. Now, go."*

Harry hurried up to Rose's room. He found the door closed. He knocked but there was no answer.

"Come on, Rose," he said as he leaned against the door, "Let me in. Let's talk, please."

Minutes passed. Just when he thought about leaving, the door's lock clicked open.

Harry cautiously opened the door. He found Rose sitting on her bed facing away from him and towards the open window. Harry sat down behind her and tentatively touched her shoulder. She shook his hand off.

Harry sighed, "Rose, look at me. Please, sis. Come on." She still didn't turn around.

"All right, I'm sorry. Ginny and I were prats, okay. We were selfish, trying to find time for ourselves and not thinking about you and our other friends. We're sorry. Please forgive us."

After a few more seconds, Rose turned around. Harry could see the track marks left by tears on her cheeks. It was heart breaking for him to know that he had cause his sister pain.

He took her hands in his, "Please, sis. We're sorry for neglecting you." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

Rose sniffed and squeezed his hand, "All right, I'll forgive the two of you. Just promise me that I'll get to spend more time with the both of you. I missed my brother and my best friend."

"I promise," Harry said, "Gin will promise you, too, as soon as she gets here. Okay?"

Rose nodded and wiped away another tear, "Okay," she said, smiling, "I knew she fancied you a long time ago. I never thought you'd fancy her back especially this early." She giggled.

Harry smiled, "I just don't fancy her, Rose. I love her. You heard Professor Dumbledore. Only true love for one another could allow the

Bond between us to form. Even if I had saved her life, if I didn't love her like I do, nothing would have happened. I know that's true. The way I see her is like the way Dad sees Mum. Seeing how much they love each other makes me want to show Ginny the same thing."

Just then, Ginny poked her head through Rose's door, "Hey you two," She came inside the room and sat beside Rose.

"Rose," she said, "I know Harry's already said it, but I'd like you to hear it from me. I'm really, really sorry for neglecting you these past few months. This Bond thing and the feelings we have for each other just came up and it was like nothing else mattered. I'm especially sorry for the past few days. I know we usually spend this time together, but when Professor Dumbledore told us about the training, well, again, nothing else seemed to matter."

"It's okay, Ginny," Rose said, "I understand, really. I know how important it is for you and Harry to control your magical power."

"Well, you may understand, Rose," Ginny said, "but that doesn't make it okay. Now, today, we'll spend time together, doing the things we usually do, okay?"

"But what about your training with Professor Dumbledore?" Rose asked.

"Harry will attend to that by himself today," Ginny said, smiling at Harry, "after all, we have forever together. Surely, we can spend a little time apart doing other things."

Harry smiled, "But not too long."

Rose giggled, "All right." She looked at Harry, "Now, shoo, you. This is girl time."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said, throwing her a salute.

He headed for the door. Just as he got there, he looked back and saw the two girls already had their heads together, talking and giggling. Harry could guess what they were talking about without

having to listen in through Ginny. He shook his head and headed down the stairs to face Dumbledore alone.

Surprisingly, at least to Harry, Dumbledore was very understanding and agreed to let Ginny skip that day's training. He then had Harry practice controlling his magic.

At the end of the session, Dumbledore again surprised Harry by announcing that he and Ginny had learned enough control and they could now learn more powerful spells. In addition, he said that their friends could have their own sessions of spell training, learning the spells Harry and Ginny already knew such as Auror stealth spells.

Harry and Ginny were pleased by that. They told Rose who was excited to learn the same spells they were learning. Harry got permission that afternoon to go to the Burrow and tell Ron the news.

Ron was initially cool to Harry but as soon as he was told about the spell training, he forgave Harry for neglecting him. The two friends spent an hour flying around the Weasleys' property then got around to contacting Neville and Hermione.

Unfortunately, Hermione had already left for a holiday abroad with her parents and would only be back for Harry's birthday. Neville, on the other hand, got all excited but asked Harry to let Maggie come along as she would be starting her first year when the new term started. Harry told him that it would be up to Neville's parents and Dumbledore.

Harry sent Hedwig to Sirius with a note asking if Ti could join them. Sirius answered back saying he was glad Harry wanted Ti to be with them as the younger boy had been in a funk since taking leave of his friends.

The next day, Harry's friends came over to Potter Manor. James met them earlier at the Burrow to allow Ron, the twins and Neville to get through the Fidelius Charm. Sirius himself brought Ti over.

Dumbledore met them in the Dueling Room. Someone else was with him.

“Remus!” Harry and Rose said as they saw the werewolf.

“What are you doing here, Professor?” Harry asked.

“Oh, you don’t have to call me that anymore, Harry,” Remus said, “I’m no longer your teacher.”

The children were all surprised.

“Why?” Harry asked, “Did someone find out about your ‘furry problem’ and complain to the Board of Governors?”

Remus smiled, “No, Harry. That’s not the reason I’ll no longer be teaching at Hogwarts.”

“That’s true, Harry, all of you,” Dumbledore said, “Because of Voldemort’s return, Remus is needed for another task, which he will be doing after the summer. For now, he will be helping me teach you spells as James and Sirius are too busy with their Auror duties to be here constantly.”

After that, they got down to actual spellwork. First, Remus asked Harry and Ginny to demonstrate some of the spells James and Sirius had been teaching Harry during the previous summer. The others were fascinated by the stealth spells. Then, with Dumbledore and Remus watching, the children practiced casting these spells.

They did this every morning. In the afternoon, the others returned home after lunch while Dumbledore had Harry and Ginny practice stronger spells. Rose often watched them.

At first, Harry and Ginny would lose consciousness for a couple of hours. But as they got stronger, they lost consciousness for lesser periods of time.

During the weekends, the sessions were suspended and the children left to do as they wanted. These were the times Harry and Ginny enjoyed most as they could be together with few people watching them.

They alternated their time between the Burrow and Potter Manor. They also took care to include Rose and Ron in some of their activities, like flying on their brooms and swimming in the pond behind the Burrow. They swam more often as the days got hotter.

A week before Harry's birthday, Remus came alone to that day's training session. After lunch, he led Harry and Ginny back to the Dueling Room.

"Harry, Ginny," Remus said, "there's a new spell Albus feels you should try to learn.'

"What's the spell, Remus?" Harry asked.

"It's called the Patronus charm, Harry," Remus said, "It's a spell used to repeal dementors. Since the dementors have joined Voldemort, the danger of an attack by them is great. So far, Voldemort has not used them. But that will change in time."

"So this spell can repeal dementors?" Ginny asked, "How come we've never heard of it before, Remus?"

"It's a difficult spell to cast, Ginny," Remus said, "It's actually beyond NEWT level. However, considering the strength of your magic, Albus feels that you and Harry may be able to."

"Can you cast it, Remus?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry, with some difficulty," Remus said, "You see, in order to cast the spell, you must think of a memory, not just any memory, but a happy memory." He smiled, "As you know, there haven't been many happy memories in my life."

Harry placed his hand on Remus' arm, "But you've had many happy times with us, haven't you, Remus?"

Remus grinned, "Of course, Harry, enough to cast a good patronus. But, come, you and Ginny have to learn it. It may take a while for you to do so."

Remus led them to one side of the room where a cabinet was set. As they got closer, the cabinet started to rustle and jump a bit. Harry and Ginny drew back, alarmed. Harry threw a questioning look at Remus.

“Don’t worry, Harry,” Remus said, “In that cabinet is a boggart, in fact, the very one we used in class earlier this year. Albus has been kind enough to ensorcell it to appear and act like a Dementor.”

He faced both of them, “Now, I must warn you. It will be almost like facing a real Dementor. You will feel a coldness and sense of despair like no other. It will make you relive your worst experience as it sucks out every happy thought.”

Both Harry and Ginny gulped. It seemed so terrible.

“Now,” Remus continued, “What you have to do to cast the Patronus charm is focus on a happy memory, point your wand at it and say clearly ‘Expecto Patronum’. This creates a Patronus which drives the Dementor away. If correctly cast, the Patronus takes the form a silvery-white corporeal creature. The type of creature that forms depends on the caster. No one is sure why. All right, do you both understand how to cast the charm?”

When both kids nodded, he said, “Okay. Harry, you go first. Step up close to the cabinet. Now, wand at the ready.” Remus then used his wand to open the cabinet.

The cabinet door drew back and a cloaked figure glided out of it, its hood drawn up and a pair of gray, glistening, slimy, dead-looking hands poking out of the robes.

Harry felt a cold draft of wind and a feeling of dread and despair. He pointed his wand at it and struggled to think of a happy memory. He settled on that of his last birthday and shouted “Expecto Patronum!”

A white mist poured out of Harry’s wand. It streaked toward the pseudo-dementor, hit it then dissipated. The pseudo-dementor moved closer to Harry.

Harry's vision started to swim as it got colder. Then as he blacked out, he heard a someone screaming his name, the voice sounding like his mother's and his own voice saying, "Ginny, please don't be dead."

When he came to, Remus was helping him sit up. Ginny was sitting beside them, her face pale and drawn. Harry knew that she had also heard the screaming voice and his voice begging her not to be dead.

"All right, Harry," Remus said, "Come on, just sit and relax. Here, have a bit of chocolate. It helps drive away the cold."

Harry took the large piece of Honeyduke's from Remus and bit into it. To his surprise, the coldness and despair ebbed as the piece of candy melted in his mouth.

"That was a pretty good start, Harry," Remus said, smiling, "Most wizards and witches can't even get anything out of their wands with this spell, just sparks. Out of curiosity, what memory did you use?"

"Um, my last birthday," Harry said.

"No, no, no, Harry," Remus said, "That's not happy enough. You have to think of a good strong, happy one, something that makes you giddy and feeling thoroughly wonderful. Well, think about it for now. Let's get you over there by the wall so you can rest a bit."

Remus and Ginny helped him get up and walk, slowly as his legs felt wobbly, toward the far wall. They propped him up by the wall. Then Remus and Ginny moved off to the cabinet.

Ginny's attempt was as better than Harry's. The white mist from her wand even started to form a shape and she didn't lose consciousness, though she was pale as she sat next to Harry.

Harry had seen through their Bond that she had relived part of her experience with the Diary while facing the pseudo-dementor. As soon as she sat down, he drew her into his arms. Ginny buried her head in the crook under his shoulder, not speaking a word.

Remus gave them a sad smile, "I guess that's enough for today. We'll continue this tomorrow. Get some rest, you two."

“Bye, Remus,” Harry said as the man left them.

Harry and Ginny continued sitting on the floor for hours, wrapped in each other's arms, simply drawing comfort from one another. Only when Rose came up to them did they separate and Ginny reluctantly went home.

They worked on the charm over the next few days. Harry and Ginny became less and less affected by the pseudo-dementor. By the day before Harry's birthday, their mist solidified and drove the dementor back but its form was still vague.

The Potter decided to celebrate Harry's 14th birthday at the Burrow for security reasons, much to the delight of Molly who took it as an opportunity to pamper her future son-in-law. She had gotten used to idea that Harry and Ginny's Bond was a sign that they would one day marry.

It was a lunch party so the guests started to arrive at half past ten. Molly forbade anyone except Lily from coming into the kitchen and absolutely refused to let the Potter house-elves help her.

Aside from all the Weasleys, Hermione, Sirius, Ti, and Remus, the people invited included Neville and Maggie, Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnegan, Lavender Brown, the Patil twins, Luna Lovegood, Professor McGonagall, Hagrid, Professor Flitwick, Madame Sprout, Madame Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore.

The guests, especially the females, crowded around Lily, who had Andrew and Daisy in her arms. Lavender, Padma and Parvati kept cooing at them.

Harry and Ginny drew Hermione aside to tell her about their training with Dumbledore. She apologized for not being there and was pleased they didn't mind her spending time with her parents. She promised to be there the next day for the training sessions.

After eating Molly's delicious feast, the group gathered round to watch Harry open his gifts. From Sirius, Remus and Ti, Harry received a book on Defensive magic. The professors gave him a foe-glass. Hagrid gave him a huge cake and some rock cakes. Neville

gave him a strange looking magical plant. Hermione and Ron gave him a refill for his broom servicing kit. Molly and Arthur gave him a new coat. The twins gave him a box filled with more joke products. His other friends gave him assortments of sweets and candies. One of the best gifts he got was from his parents and sister – a brand new broom.

“Whoa, Harry,” Ron said as Harry unwrapped it, “Is that the new Firebolt?”

“Um, I guess it is,” Harry said, awed by the gift. He turned around and hugged his family.

“Thanks, Mum. Thanks, Dad. Thanks, sis.”

Harry then noticed that there wasn't a gift from Ginny. He looked at her quizzingly.

“I want to give you your gift in private, Harry.” she told him mentally.

Harry could feel her nervousness, *“Gin, I'd love any gift from you,”* he told her gently, *“I don't care what it is. As long as it's from you, I'll cherish it.”*

Ginny hugged him then dragged him away from the crowd. She led him into the woods that bordered the Weasley property, near the river Otter. They sat down in a clearing near its edge, facing each other. They could see the waters of the river just beyond the trees.

Ginny pulled out a brightly wrapped package from behind her and handed it to Harry without a word. Harry could still feel a twinge of nervous anticipation coming from her.

Harry unwrapped the gift carefully, more careful than he usually was. He found it was a box. He opened the box and was surprised to find a picture frame.

The picture was of him and Ginny. In it, he and Ginny were holding hands while walking then Harry stopped, picked Ginny up and whirled her around. Ginny was laughing hard.

Harry grinned as he looked at Ginny. He made sure she could feel his happiness and pleasure over the gift. He then drew her into his arms.

"Thank you, Ginny," he said as he hugged her, "I'll set this up beside my bed wherever I am. That way, it'll be the last thing I see before I sleep and the first thing I see in the morning when I wake up. It'll have to do until we're married and I have the real thing to wake up beside."

Ginny was evidently surprised and pleased by what Harry said because she hugged him harder and started kissing him on the lips. Harry returned her kiss.

As they were kissing, Harry felt the warmth around them start to disappear. It got colder and colder which was unusual for summer. He knew she could feel it, too.

Together, they turned around, looking for the reason for the cold spell. Then they saw them – Dementors, a pair of them. The river was already freezing over as they crossed it. It appeared that they were headed for the Burrow, though they would bypass the pair in the woods.

"Harry! What do we do?" Ginny asked.

Both of them were already feeling the effects of the Dementors' presence.

"It's too late to run back, Gin," he said, *"With the speed they're moving, they'll reach the Burrow before we can get there to warn the others. We'll have to try that charm Remus taught us."*

"I'm scared, Harry," Ginny said.

"I know, I am, too. Just remember, concentrate on a happy memory. I've got it. Remember our first kiss. Think about how happy it made you. All right? Ready, one, two, three!"

Together, they cried, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

A ball of silver light came out of each wand, expanding to form a shape that rushed toward the Dementors.

Harry and Ginny watched, fascinated as their Patronus each took a distinct shape and rammed into the Dementors, driving them away, shrieking.

"Did you see that, Harry?" Ginny asked, a bit of awe in her mental voice.

"Yeah," Harry said, awe also in his voice, *"our Patronuses took clear shapes for the first time. Mine looked like a deer."*

"I think the plural is Patroni, Harry," Ginny said, amusement now in her voice, *"not Patronuses. And that's not just a deer. With that set of antlers, it's most likely a stag. Mine took the shape of a lion. Wow!"*

Just then, they heard the sounds of running feet coming from behind them. They turned and pointed their wands in that direction. Then they lowered them and let out sighs of relief as James, Sirius and Remus burst into the clearing.

The three men slowed down and came closer to the two children, their own wands still raised.

"What happened, Harry?" James asked, "Rose said something about the two of you being in trouble, something about Dementors."

"Yeah," Sirius said, "She got quite hysterical when we wouldn't believe her. Then it started getting cold. She said you were in the woods near the river and she was right."

Harry and Ginny's eyes widened.

"She said that?" Harry asked, "Well, she was right, Dad. We were just talking here when we felt it getting cold. Then we saw the river starting to freeze over and we saw them. There were two Dementors, crossing the river and headed for the Burrow."

The three men's eyes were now wide as well.

"So, what happened?" Sirius asked, "Where are they now? How did you escape them?"

"We, we used the Patronus charm, Sirius," Ginny said, "It drove them away."

Remus grinned while James and Sirius were surprised and awed by this.

"That's great, Harry, Ginny," Remus finally said then he turned to his friends, "I've been teaching them that for a week. Albus and I were worried they may need it. Good thing, too, it seems."

He turned back to the two children, "So, did your Patroni take on distinct shapes? They'd have to in order to have driven the Dementors off."

"Yes, Remus," Harry said, grinning, "Ginny's looked like a lion and mine looked like a stag."

"A stag?" James asked, "Well, that's interesting. Harry, you do remember what my animagus form is, right?"

Harry's eyes widened, "Of course! It's a stag! Wow! That is awesome."

Ginny eyes crinkled as she talked to Harry mentally, *"Harry, if your Patronus form is like your Dad's animagus form, then why is my Patronus' form a lion?"*

"Hmm. I'm not sure, Ginny. Let's ask Dad and Remus. If they don't know, maybe Professor Dumbledore might."

"Dad," Harry said, "My Patronus is a stag just like your animagus form. Why is that? Why then is Ginny's Patronus a lion?"

"I'm not sure, Harry," James said, his right thumb and index finger on his chin, "My Patronus is a stag just like yours. Maybe we can ask Albus. At any rate," he continued, smiling, "what you and Ginny did was, to borrow a word from you, awesome. To be able to cast a Patronus charm successfully at your ages is almost unheard off. I couldn't cast one until I entered the Auror training program. With it, you managed to drive the Dementors away before they could do any harm to us and the other people here. That's really heroic."

Harry and Ginny felt their cheeks heat up from embarrassment.

"Oh, look, Prongs, Moony," Sirius said, grinning, "they're blushing together. My, my, what a couple they make."

"Knock it off, Padfoot," James said, grinning, "Before the young lady here gets pissed and shows you her trademark Bat Bogey hex." Ginny did seem to be getting redder and not from amusement as a scowl formed on her face.

"All right, all right," Sirius said, "Geez, I can't even get some fun out of this."

James and Remus laughed.

"Well, never mind," James said, "let's get back to the party and reassure the others."

As they walked back to the Burrow, Ginny caught Harry's attention, "*Harry,*" she said, mentally, "*didn't your dad say that Rose told them where we were and that there were Dementors involved? How did she know all that?*"

"*I don't know, Ginny,*" Harry said, mentally, "*I wondered about that. Do you think she can read our minds without us knowing it, Gin?*"

"*No, I don't think that's it, Harry,*" Ginny said, mentally, "*There must be another explanation.*"

"*What then, Gin?*" Harry asked, mentally, "*How did Rose know that there were Dementors there and we were there in the woods?*"

"*I'm not sure, Harry,*" Ginny said, mentally, "*but remember Valentine's Day when we had that picnic?*"

"*Yeah, what about it?*"

"*Well, she suggested that we avoid the shore of the lake and warned me about the apples.*"

Harry raised an eyebrow and looked at Ginny, *"Really? I remember the squid splashed some of the people on the shore while we were looking for a place for our picnic and those apples had worms in them. What does that mean?"*

"There's only one explanation, Harry," Ginny said, "She saw it before they happened."

Harry's eyes widened, *"You mean she saw the future? That means she's..."*

"A seer, Harry," Ginny said, *"Your sister's a seer."*

"Whoa, what until Mum finds out. She doesn't exactly have a kind opinion of divination."

"That explains why Rose is taking it next term," Ginny said, mentally, *"I wondered why. She told me that she found it interesting. Now, it seems she's preparing for her future."*

By then, they were approaching the Burrow and the other people there. Luckily, the three men with them had been busy discussing the Dementors and what their attack meant to pay notice that Harry and Ginny had been preoccupied.

"Harry, we have to talk to Rose. We need to find out how much she knows about what's happening. Maybe she knows something of Voldemort."

"All right, Gin. We'll do it tonight when we're back at Potter Manor."

Just then, Molly and Lily came forward and engulfed them in motherly hugs, at the same time inquiring about their health. Harry and Ginny assured them that they were fine.

The Bonded pair noticed that Rose and Hermione were talking to each other, just like they had been in the last days of the last term and on the Hogwarts Express.

"Harry, do you think Rose told Hermione about her visions?" Ginny asked Harry mentally.

"I'm not sure, Gin." Harry answered, "They aren't as close as she is to you or Hermione is to me. Then again, she certainly hasn't confided in us, has she?"

"No, she hasn't," Ginny said, "Maybe she decided to find out more about seers. She knows Hermione is great at research and skeptical enough about Divination to be objective."

Harry snorted, "Skeptical is kind of a mild term for what Hermione feels about it. But you're right. Research is definitely Hermione's specialty. Look at how much information she found on our Bond."

"So, will you ask Rose about it?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah, I will, tonight." Harry answered.

Chapter 42: Prophecies and Anger Management

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

Harry walked over to Rose's room and paused by the door. He and his family had been invited and therefore stayed for dinner at the Burrow after the party wound down to, in Molly's words, 'allow Harry time to rest after such a harrowing experience'. Most of the guests left after being warned by Dumbledore not to say anything about the Dementor attack.

Remus, Sirius, and Ti also stayed for dinner. Neville said he wanted to stay but he had to take Maggie home which didn't please his sister, who had been listening to stories about Hogwarts from the other kids.

Harry was pleasantly surprised to learn that Hermione would be staying at the Burrow in Ginny's room for the rest of the summer. Now, she would be able to join them in the training sessions. He noted with interest and amusement how red Ron's face had gotten when it was revealed that it had been Ron's idea to invite Hermione over. He also had noticed that Rose and Hermione had been talking quietly during dinner.

Now, he knocked on Rose's door. He heard the muffled "Yes?" and answered, "It's me, Rose. Can we talk?"

"Um, sure, bro. Come on in," she replied.

Harry entered the room and saw that Rose was sitting up in her bed, her back against the headboard. He sat down on the bed.

"Sis," Harry began, "Ginny and I were wondering how you knew where we were and that there were Dementors coming."

"Er, I saw you two sneak away, headed for the woods," she replied.

"What about the Dementors?" Harry asked.

"I, uh, started feeling cold," Rose said, "I remembered what Remus said about them."

Harry shook his head, "No, that's not exactly true. Ginny remembered some things you told her last Valentine's Day, about not sitting on the lakeshore and not to eat the apples. The only way you could have known all that is if you saw it before it happened. You're a seer, aren't you? Come on, sis. You can trust us."

Rose drew her legs up to her chest and hugged them around the knees. Then she slowly nodded, her eyes warily watching Harry for his reaction.

Harry placed his hand reassuringly on her knee, "It's okay, Rose. It's fine. Don't let it bother you. I'm not going to get mad at you just because I can't stand Divination. This isn't your fault." To his surprise, Rose flung herself at him, embracing him fiercely.

"Harry," Ginny said in his mind, *"Please let her know it's okay with me, too."*

"Okay, Gin," Harry said to her.

"Um, Ginny says she's fine with it, too." Harry said to Rose who was still embracing him tightly.

"We're fine with it, as well," a familiar voice said behind them.

Harry turned around to see their parents standing there, in the open door. He had forgotten to close it and they had probably overheard their conversation.

James and Lily sat down on the bed.

"Honey," Lily said, "why didn't you say anything to us? We wouldn't think any worse of you if you are a seer."

"But, Mum," Rose said, tears in her eyes, "I know you think Divination is full of baloney. I didn't want to disappoint you."

Lily drew Rose into her arms, "Rose, don't think that I wouldn't love you just because you have flashes of the future. This isn't something you asked for, just as Harry didn't ask to be the one to defeat

Voldemort and get that scar. Sometimes, Fate just throws us something unexpected and we just deal with it the best we can.”

“So, when did you start having these flashes of the future,” James asked, gently.

“Um, right after my twelfth birthday,” Rose said, “At first, I didn’t know what they were; just that I’d see something happen to people then see it again after a few minutes or hours. They would come randomly, a couple of instances every week. Then, I realized what they were just before Christmas. I realized that I could have kept some people from getting hurt if I had warned them about what I saw. So, I warned Harry and Ginny not to have their picnic by the lake and to avoid the apples in the basket as they were filled with maggots.”

“I never did find out how your picnic went, Harry,” Lily said, smiling.

Harry felt his cheeks heat up, “Um, it was fine, Mum. Ginny loved it. Thanks for the suggestion and the food.”

“Harry, you haven’t thanked your Mum for that yet? You better not be that way with me, Potter or you’ll be sorry.”

“Gulp, sorry, Gin, things sort of came up after that and I never got the chance.”

“All right, Harry. Take it as a lesson.”

“Yes, dear.”

“Harry,” his mother’s voice broke into his thoughts, “you’re talking to Ginny in your mind, aren’t you?”

“Uh, yeah, Mum,” Harry said, feeling embarrassed for zoning out on his mother, “Sorry, she didn’t mean to interrupt but she found out I haven’t thanked you for suggesting that picnic and got miffed at my thoughtlessness.”

Lily laughed, “She scolded you, didn’t she? I’ve always liked her. It’ll be great to have her as a future daughter-in-law.” She had a smirk on her face, “She’ll keep you in line when I’m not here.”

Harry scowled but smiled inwardly when he felt the feelings of embarrassment and pleasure coming from Ginny over Lily's words.

Suddenly, Rose sat up straight, eyes glazed over, and started to talk in a strange voice,

They gather now, they who would stand by the Chosen One,

His six companions, bonded by love deep and true

The Soul Mate, his other half, his strength

The Seer, his sister in blood, his guide

The Wise Lady, his sister in all but blood, his font of knowledge

The Strategist, his best friend, his right hand

The Green Lord, his equal in power, his general

The White Ram, saved from Evil by him, his left hand

Training they need together, to defeat the Dark Lord

Let not one be lost or all will be for naught

And the Dark Lord will defeat the Chosen one

Rose then slumped against the bed's headboard, her eyes now closed while Harry, James and Lily stared at her in shock.

"Harry?" Ginny said in Harry's mind, "*did, did your sister just make a, a p-prophecy?*"

"I, I, I don't know, Gin," Harry said to her, "*M-m-maybe. That voice was like the voice Trelawney used that time I heard her.*"

James, meanwhile, had gotten over the shock and had moved to Rose, gently checking her out, "She's asleep. We should just let her sleep." He carefully lifted Rose and laid her down on the bed. Lily drew the covers over her.

"Mum?" Harry asked, "What just happened? Did Rose make an actual prophecy?"

Lily looked at her son, noting the confusion and unease on his face and posture, "I'm not sure, Harry." She looked at her husband.

James sighed, "I think we'll have to contact Albus and tell him about this."

He exited from Rose's room, followed by Lily and Harry and descended the stairs to the living room.

Drawing his wand, James relit the fire and threw some floo powder into the fire. He then stuck his head in the fire. He spoke for a few moments, his words too low for either Harry or Lily to hear.

When he pulled his head out of the fire, he said, "Albus will be here shortly." They all sat down.

After a few moments, Harry asked, "Dad, what's going on? Just who is this Chosen One? That's the second time I've heard that term. Professor Trelawney's prediction also mentioned him."

"I think we should wait for Albus before we discuss this, Harry," James said.

Harry noticed that his father seemed nervous.

Ginny was quiet but Harry could feel her uneasy presence in his mind, silently waiting with them, though she was in her room.

A few seconds later, Dumbledore stepped out of the fire. He had his pensieve levitated in front of him, which surprised Harry and Ginny.

"Good evening, James, Lily, Harry," Dumbledore said, "Under the circumstances, I felt that we may need my pensieve." He set the pensieve down on the center table, "Now, tell me what happened with Rose."

James relayed to Dumbledore all he could remember about what had happened in Rose's room.

Dumbledore listened until James was finished then said, "So Rose is a Seer. Fascinating. It's interesting what talents your children are showing, James, Lily." He had a twinkle in his eye and a slight smile on his face as he spoke. "Now, about this prediction or prophecy, I think it's wise if we see it as a memory. James, if you please."

James allowed Dumbledore to extract the memory of Rose's prophecy from his mind.

Then Dumbledore replayed the memory for all to see. No one spoke for a few seconds after.

Harry then said, "So, Professor, who is this Chosen One?"

"To know that, Harry," Dumbledore said, "you need to see another prophecy, made just before you were born." He looked at Harry's parents for a moment.

Then he activated the pensieve and stood back.

Harry watched as the upper body of Professor Trelawney rose from the stone basin and started to speak.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches.....Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies....and The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not....and either must die at the hands of the other for neither can live while the other survives.....the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...

The whole room became silent after Trelawney's image had descended back into the pensieve. Harry looked around at his parents and Dumbledore. They were watching him warily, especially his parents.

What did it all mean? Harry thought, especially that last part about neither living if the other survived? What does this have to do with me?

“Harry?” Ginny broke into his thoughts, her mental voice shaking, “I, I, think they believe this prophecy was talking about you. The part about being born as the seventh month dies means whoever it’s talking about was born at the end of July, like you. How many times have your parents confronted Voldemort before you were born? Y-y-your scar was caused by Voldemort. Was that the mark it’s talking about?”

It all clicked then in Harry’s mind. They believed he was the Chosen One, chosen to fight Voldemort and, hopefully, destroy him for good.

“This was about me, wasn’t it?” he asked the three adults with him, “You think this thing was talking about me.”

“Yes, Harry,” Dumbledore said, “you and only one other fit the pattern of the prophecy. You were born at the end of July to parents who have defied Voldemort three times.”

“Who’s the other one, Professor?” Harry asked, though he suspected the answer.

“Neville Longbottom, Harry,” Dumbledore said, “As you know, he too was born near the end of July and, as auror, his parents have defied Voldemort three times as well. However, if you note the second part of the prophecy, Voldemort would mark his nemesis himself.”

Harry then raised his hand to touch his scar.

“Yes, Harry,” Dumbledore continued, “that night Voldemort attacked you and James and Lily, he marked you as the one.”

“D-d-does he know about this prophecy, Professor?” Harry asked.

“Unfortunately, Harry,” Dumbledore said, “someone who was working for him at the time this was given happened to hear part of it. Fortunately, he only heard the first part. Voldemort is unaware that by attacking you, he marked you as the one who can defeat him once and for all.”

"Then this is the reason my parents and I went into hiding back then, wasn't it?" Harry asked, "This is the reason he attacked us. He thought he could get rid of me before I became a threat to him."

"Yes, Harry," James said, finally speaking, "we knew Voldemort would try to kill you, so we went into hiding, even though Lily was already pregnant with Rose."

"So, you knew about this prophecy all along, Dad," Harry said, his voice starting to rise, "When did you plan to tell me? When he comes knocking at our door again? When?"

"It's not like we wanted to keep it from you, Harry," James said, his eyes pleading for his understanding, "We wanted to you to have a good childhood, without worrying about Voldemort. We thought we had time to prepare you, we thought he wouldn't be back for years, at least, not until you were finished at Hogwarts. Then we were going to start with your real training."

"Yeah?" Harry said, "Great plan, Dad. Now what? He's back and I'm not ready to face him. I'm not sure if I really have this power he knows not. That prophecy doesn't say that I'll defeat him, does it? It just says one of us will kill the other. What about Ginny then? With this Bond thing, she'll die if Voldemort kills me." Harry could hear Ginny saying some things to him but ignored her as he confronted his father.

"Harry, don't you think we know that?" Lily asked, tears in her eyes, "We've always known it was possible that he would kill you instead of the other way around. When we learned about the Bond, it became even worse because of that. So, we showed Arthur and Molly the prophecy, so they would know what may happen."

"You told them?" Harry asked, his voice rising again, "You told them even before telling me? No wonder they've been giving me sad looks when they thought I wouldn't notice. I thought it was because they were seeing their youngest child already close to leaving them. I never thought it was because they knew we might soon die!" Harry shouted this last part. This was followed by a loud bang.

They all turned around and found that there was now a large crack running along the marble mantle of the fireplace.

Harry then turned and ran up to his room, ignoring the frantic calls of his parents. He slammed his door and threw himself in his bed.

They've been lying to me my whole life. Now I know why Voldemort attacked us. They knew and never told me, even after I asked them that night after we saved the Stone. I hate them!

"No, you don't" Ginny's voice said in his mind.

"Not now, Gin, please. You know, we should really ask the Headmaster about a way to sever this bond. It's starting to get annoying to have you in my head all the time."

"You self-centered prat! How dare you? I know why you're doing this. You're afraid what would happen if Voldemort manages to kill you. Well, for your information, mister, we're not doing anything to remove the bond. We're in this together."

"Ginny, please, it's not safe."

"Harry, don't you get it, you prat. Remember, our magic is a lot stronger together than apart. We need to stay together. That blasted prophecy doesn't change anything. What was that we talked about after we woke up, about getting more training? It just gives us more reason to train harder, Harry. Train harder so we can kick the crap out of Tom and go on with our lives."

Harry sighed, *"How do you do that, Gin? How do you know what to say to me so I calm down?"*

"I guess it comes from knowing you for so long, Harry." Ginny began then before she could say anything else, an intense pain shot through Harry's scar.

The pain became so intense that Harry let out a blood-curdling scream as his body went into convulsions. He shut his eyes and curled his body into a ball. Spots started to form behind his eyelids.

He became dimly aware of people running into his room. He felt arms wrap around him then he dimly heard his mother's voice trying to reach him but the pain was so bad.

Finally, another set of arms, smaller and warmer wrapped around him. He felt another kind of warmth wrap around his mind and the pain slowly ebbed.

Harry heard Ginny's voice in his mind, *"Harry, I'm here. It's going to be all right. Open your eyes, sweetie."*

Harry slowly opened his eyes as the pain in his scar became a dull ache. His glasses had fallen off when his body gone into convulsions. All he saw was a small face framed by red hair looking at him. From her presence in his mind, he knew it was Ginny. Looking up, he saw three people standing around his bed.

He felt exhausted. He was only vaguely aware of his surroundings.

"You're worn out, Harry." Ginny said, *"Go on and sleep. I'll be here. Don't worry."*

Harry gave in to his fatigue and drifted off to sleep.

Ginny sat up and took hold of Harry's hand. She noticed it was starting to get bigger than hers. She then looked up at the adults gathered in Harry's room

"He's sleeping peacefully now," she told them, "It was Tom, Voldemort. He seemed to be very angry. His anger bled through to Harry's scar."

"How did you know what happened, Ginny?" Lily asked, "Were you two talking earlier?"

"Yes, L-Lily," Ginny stammered, "I heard everything, including the Prophecy through the Bond. I knew he was angry so I was trying to calm him down after he got up here when the pain started in his scar. I rushed over here then."

She blushed then as she realized that she was wearing only her nightgown, forgetting to even put on a robe in her panic to get to Harry as soon as possible. The gown was thin and showed her developing body and its curves quite well. There was some soot on her gown and face, evidence she had used the floo to come over.

"What did you do, Miss Weasley?" Dumbledore asked, "A few moments after you arrived, Harry seemed to calm down."

"I'm not sure, Professor," Ginny said, "I just reached into his mind through the Bond and Tom just went away."

"Interesting," Dumbledore said, a familiar twinkle in his eye, "It seems to be another benefit of the Bond for Harry. Do you know if this has happened to him before, Miss Weasley?"

"Well, Professor," Ginny replied, "He mentioned having some pain in his scar both times he had those visions of Voldemort, but this is the first time it's hurt him this badly."

Dumbledore sighed and turned to the other people in the room, "It appears that the connection between Harry and Voldemort is increasing. Any strong emotions coming from Voldemort now cause Harry great pain."

Lily sat on Harry's other side from Ginny. She stopped Ginny from moving from Harry's side with a smile and a gentle motion of her other hand.

"Please stay there, Ginny," she said gently, "I think your presence is good for him." Her smile widened when Ginny blushed but stayed where she was.

"What can we do, Albus?" Lily asked, as she gently stroked the hair of her sleeping son "Is there any way to cut the connection between that monster and Harry?"

"I don't know, Lily," Dumbledore said, "As far as I know, there isn't a known case like this, probably because no one else has ever survived the Killing curse and had a scar like Harry's."

He continued to stare at the boy sleeping peacefully in the bed. His scar was no longer red and angry-looking.

“Well,” Dumbledore finally said, “I think it’s passed. But to be certain, I think Miss Weasley should stay by his side, in case, Voldemort is still angry.”

He turned to James and Lily with the familiar twinkle in his eye, “I hope this is all right with you, being Harry’s parents that a girl spends the night with him.”

James and Lily exchanged a bemused glance and shrugged their shoulders.

“If you think it’s best, Albus,” James said, a smirk forming on his face, “My son is sure a lucky guy. OW!”

Lily had just punched him on the shoulder, “Really, James,” she said, “This isn’t funny.” But then her mouth twitched, “It is kind of cute, though.” She grinned when Ginny blushed again.

Just then, they heard the unmistakable voice of Molly Weasley yelling for James and Lily, undoubtedly looking for her daughter. Ginny gasped and blushed even more.

“Don’t worry, Miss Weasley,” Dumbledore said, smiling at her, “I will explain everything to your parents, especially your mother. I doubt anything serious can happen with Harry sleeping deeply.” He then left the room.

James and Lily smiled and James gestured to Ginny to lie down comfortably, which she did even though her face was as red as her hair.

Lily arranged the sheets over Ginny and Harry. She kissed Harry on the forehead.

She then leaned over him and kissed Ginny on her forehead. “Thank you, for being here for him,” she said to her as she stood up. James preceded her from the room.

As she exited from the room, Lily paused at the door. She looked back at the two kids on the bed.

Ginny had her arms around Harry again, her head resting on his chest. A few seconds later, she seemed to be asleep as well. In spite of being asleep, Harry's arm also wound around Ginny.

As she closed the door behind her, Lily was saddened that her son was already drawing comfort from another woman at such a young age.

She went back down to the living room and found her husband sitting on one of the couches. Dumbledore still had his head in the fireplace, probably talking to Molly. Lily hoped Arthur was with her, to help the Headmaster calm her down. She could just imagine Molly muttering things about scarlet women.

Lily sat down beside James, who placed his arm around her and drew her to him. Lily laid her head on his chest as he leaned back into the couch. They watched Dumbledore in silence.

Finally, Dumbledore stood away from the fire and sat down on an armchair across from James and Lily.

"Well, it took a while," he said with a small smile on his face, "but I convinced Molly not to come over and haul her daughter back home with her. She reluctantly accepts the fact that Harry needs his soul mate right now though she asked me to request that one of your house elves look in on them once in a while to make sure nothing inappropriate happens."

Lily smiled, "Of course, Albus. I'll ask Blinky." She paused for a moment then said, "Albus, about this prophecy from Rose, what do you think it's about?"

Dumbledore looked thoughtful for a few seconds, "Well, Lily, I believe it gives a list of people who will help him defeat Voldemort or, more accurately, who will fight at his side when the time comes to confront Voldemort for the last time."

"Fight at his side?" James asked, "Do you have any idea who they are, Albus?"

"Oh, I believe the titles bestowed on each of these six companions plus the descriptions are important clues to their identity, James," Dumbledore said, "Obviously, his soul mate is Ginny and the seer who is his sister in blood is Rose. As to the others, I have my suspicions. For now, we will let it lie until we can talk to Harry again."

Dumbledore then stood up, "I must now take your leave. It has been a very interesting and tiring day. Oh, James, please tell Harry and Ginevra that, due to tonight's events, I want them to relax tomorrow. I shall see them on Tuesday, at the usual time." With that, he apparated away.

James and Lily remained where they were, staring at the fire and their minds thinking about the day and night's events. Then the clock above the fireplace chimed the hour, drawing them from their thoughts.

Lily looked up at James then, sobbing, pressed her face into his chest. James tightened his embrace around her and rubbed his hands soothingly up and down her back.

"It'll be all right, Lils," he said to her.

She looked up at him again, tears streaking down her face, "Will it, James? Two Dementors came to the Burrow today, James. If Remus hadn't taught Harry and Ginny the Patronus charm..... I hate to think what would have happened. Now we learn of another prophecy and it seems Rose is involved in this whole bloody mess."

She got to her feet and faced him, "What do we do, James? Our two eldest children are going to have to face that monster. I'm afraid that tomorrow, there'll be another prophecy telling us Andrew and Daisy are also part of it. I don't want to lose any of them. I'll do what is necessary to protect them."

James looked down at his feet, running his hand through his messy hair, a gesture Lily noted Harry often did himself when he was nervous. Finally, James sighed and looked up at his wife.

"We can only do our best, Lily," he said, "We just train them as much as we can and stand with them when the time comes. That's all we can do."

He got up and extended his hand to her, "Come on, sweetheart. Let's get to bed. A good night's sleep will clear our minds."

Lily took his hand and together, they ascended the stairs back to their bedroom.

Hours later, Harry slowly woke up. As his senses awakened from slumber, he felt a familiar pressure on his chest.

He opened his eyes and looked down to see a sea of red hair on his chest. He smiled and opened his mind to hers. As he expected, she was still sleeping.

Harry leaned back in the bed. He reached up and touched his scar, relieved when he found it was cool to his touch.

He wondered what Ginny had done the previous night to ease the pain. Whatever she had done, he was glad she had done it.

He slowly reached for his glasses on his night table. After some fumbling, he found them and put them on.

Sunlight was coming in through his window and the clock on his dresser said it was ten in the morning.

Startled, Harry reached Ginny's mind, shouting, *"Gin, wake up! It's already ten."*

Ginny sprang up from Harry's side, causing the blanket draped around them to fall away.

"Harry, you prat!" she screamed into his mind, her hands holding her head, *"Don't do that! You don't like me doing it to you, so don't shout into my mind like that."*

"Sorry, Gin," Harry replied, a sheepish tone in his voice, "I was just surprised by how late it was. Professor Dumbledore's probably waiting."

It was then that Harry noticed what Ginny was wearing. His eyes bulged out of their sockets and his jaw dropped almost to the floor. The gown Ginny had on gave a better glimpse of her body than he had ever seen, including the starting bumps on her chest.

Ginny smirked when her mind detected his reaction. She reached out and used one finger to close his mouth and wipe the bit of drool that had dripped from it.

Before either of them could react further, there was a knock on the door. The door opened a moment later and Rose peeked inside.

She raised an eyebrow as she gazed at them, but didn't comment. Instead, she said, "Hey, you two. Mum just sent me to check if you were both awake. She also said to tell you that Professor Dumbledore was giving you the day off training."

"How are you doing, sis?" Harry asked, "Do you remember what happened last night?"

Rose grimaced and came inside the room, closing the door behind her. She said down on the bed beside Ginny.

"If you're asking about that prophecy I'm supposed to have made," Rose said, "No, I don't remember doing that. The last thing I remember was Mum laughing at you about Ginny and Valentine's Day, then waking up this morning."

"So you know about the prophecy you made?" Ginny asked her.

Rose nodded, "Professor Dumbledore talked to me about it this morning with Mum and Dad." She shrugged, "I guess it shouldn't surprise me. According to all the stuff Hermione and I managed to find about seers, every single one made one or more prophecies or predictions in their lives."

After several seconds of silence, Harry said, "About Hermione, sis, its good you found someone to help you find out about seers. I'm not happy you two kept it from us, but at least you had someone to confide in."

"Oh it wasn't easy, bro," Rose said, "It took me a while to convince her to help me without telling any of you. I'm sure she'll be relieved that the secrecy is over. Enough about me, what happened to you last night that required your Bond mate to spend the night with you. Mum wouldn't give me an explanation."

Harry grimaced and said quietly, "Old Voldie got really mad last night and I felt his anger. I felt like my scar was on fire and then it spread to my whole body."

Rose's eyes widened, "W-w-was it that bad?"

"Yeah, it was," Ginny said softly answering for Harry, "When it started, Harry seemed to move away from me. I could barely feel his presence. I flooded over immediately. I felt the pain as I stepped inside the room. I felt another presence in Harry's mind, dark and evil. As soon as I touched Harry's mind with mine, the evil presence left, shrieking. Professor Dumbledore told me to stay the night in case he came back."

She looked at Harry who seemed to have gotten quiet and brooding. She reached out and took his hand in hers. "Don't think about it, Harry. It's over for now."

Harry looked up to see her smiling at him. Her mind was caressing his in a way he found soothing and comforting, drawing him from his dark thoughts. He smiled back and touched her mind with his own, sending her feelings of love and gratitude.

Rose's voice broke them out of their trance, "Hey now, enough of that. You two have the day free."

They looked back at her then at each other.

"So," Harry asked Ginny in her mind, "*What do you want to do today?*"

Ginny shrugged as she replied mentally, *"I don't know. How about I head back to the Burrow for a shower and a change of clothes first? Then maybe we can have breakfast and try out that new broom of yours."*

Harry grinned, remembering the Firebolt his parents had given him the day before for his birthday.

"You're on, Gin. Let's go."

Just then Rose said, "Hey, will you two stop that when there are other people in the room. Honestly, people will think you're trying to hide something. Oooh, maybe you are. Planning a little secret rendezvous, lovebirds?"

Harry shook his head, "You know, sis, for a minute I thought you were channeling Hermione or even worse, Ron."

Rose's eyes widened for a moment before they narrowed, "I'll get you for that remark, brother of mine."

Harry and Ginny laughed and got up.

Ginny gave Harry a kiss on the lips, pulling back before Harry could deepen it. "See you later, love." She left the room, pulling Rose along with her.

Harry smiled and started looking in his drawers for something cool to wear. The day was already starting to heat up. He looked forward to the rest of the summer, especially Ginny's birthday. He needed to get permission from his parents to go to Diagon Alley to get her birthday present.

Chapter 43: The World Cup and Voldemort's first moves

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

Harry glanced nervously at Ginny as he struggled to keep his mind blank. They were at the Burrow for Ginny's birthday party. So far he had managed to keep his gift to her a secret from her, thanks to Professor Dumbledore's latest mental exercises.

Due to what had happened that night after Harry's birthday party, Dumbledore decided to find a way to help Harry block his connection with Voldemort. In the evenings, the Headmaster had started teaching Occlumency to Harry so he could block Voldemort by forming a wall in his mind. Because of the Soul Bond, Ginny was also learning the same thing, even if she wasn't physically present during Harry's lessons.

As a side effect of the Occlumency training, Harry and Ginny were now able to seal off parts of their thoughts from the other behind a door. It wasn't that effective since the Soul Bond would still allow them to remove the door with proper concentration. They just depended on the respect they had for each other to prevent their mate from opening that door.

Now, they were at the same spot by the river Otter where Ginny had given Harry his birthday present barely a week and a half ago. Harry watched Ginny with apprehension as she removed the wrapping on the small box that contained his present to her. His nervousness was heightened by the fact that this was the first birthday gift he was giving to her as her boyfriend. As he felt her curiosity and anticipation, he hoped that she would like it.

Finally, she had the box unwrapped in her hand and opened it. Inside was a charm bracelet made of gold with three charms on it. One charm was a letter H, another was a G and the third was a heart, set in the middle of the two letters. A note in the box said:

To my dearest Ginny,

Wear this as a symbol of my eternal love for you, until I can give you that ring you most surely deserve to wear.

Love always,

Harry

Tears filled Ginny's eyes as she gazed at Harry. Harry could feel a surge of love and happiness from her. She threw her arms around him and started kissing his face over and over again.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," she said in his mind as she continued to kiss him.

"You're welcome, Ginny, love," he said in her mind as he returned her embrace. Then he kissed her on her lips. He was about to deepen the kiss when someone coughed behind them.

They looked in the direction of the cough, still in each other's arms. Standing there at the edge of the clearing, was Rose with a smirk on her face. Behind her were Harry's best friends. Hermione was smiling while Ron had yet another disgusted look on his face.

"Oi, would you mind not doing that where I can see it?" the red head boy said.

For that, Ron got a kick on the shin from Rose and a slap on the back of his head from Hermione.

While Ron grumbled and rubbed his damaged areas, Rose and Hermione stepped up to Ginny to inspect the bracelet.

Then the five friends then returned to the Burrow to continue the party. The same guests from Harry's party were there.

After their other guests left for home, leaving the Potters, Weasleys, Sirius, Hermione, Remus and Ti alone in the Burrow, James and Arthur turned to the others with mysterious smiles on their faces.

"Dad," Harry said, with his eyes narrowing, "I know that smile. It's your 'I'm being sneaky and devious' smile. What's up?"

“Well,” James said, “I’m sure you’ve heard that the Quidditch World Cup will be held here in two weeks time.”

“Yeah, Dad,” Harry said, one eyebrow cocked up in suspicion, “We know that. In fact, it’s a topic we all discuss when we aren’t doing anything else.”

“Good, well, the thing is,” James said, still smiling, “Since I’m the head of the Aurors and Arthur is a deputy minister, together, we’ve been able to get enough tickets to the Cup for thirteen people to attend it. That would be you eight kids, Bill, Charlie, Percy Arthur and Remus. We even got a wizarding tent so we can stay overnight at the camp site the Ministry is setting up for the spectators.”

“WHAT?” Harry, Ginny, Rose, Ron, Fred and George shouted at the same time, jumping up onto their feet. Hermione had a forced smile on her face and Ti simple looked stunned. Bill and Charlie were also grinning while Percy had a neutral expression on his face.

James and Arthur exchanged grins.

“No way, Dad,” Ron said, “We can all go?”

“Yes, Ron,” Arthur said, “Even Hermione and Ti can go. Sirius has already agreed on it. I actually got Hermione’s parents’ permission when I came to get her on Harry’s birthday.”

Ron turned to Hermione, “Did you know about this? How come you didn’t tell me?” There was an indignant tone in his voice.

“Well, Ronald,” Hermione said, glaring at Ron, “Your father explained that it was to be a surprise for Ginny’s birthday. I didn’t want to spoil the surprise.”

“Yeah?” Ron retorted, looking for a moment he was going to argue with Hermione but he then shrugged his shoulders, “Well, um, I guess that’s fine. Okay.”

He then turned to Harry, “Isn’t that great, Harry? Imagine, Ireland versus Bulgaria. We’ll be able to see Krum! He must be the greatest seeker in the world.”

Harry and Ginny both rolled their eyes. Ron had been going on and on about Krum since they started talking about the Cup. It was getting old.

Harry turned to his dad, "Hey, Dad, why aren't you and Sirius coming? I wouldn't have thought you'd pass up a chance to see the World Cup."

James sighed and sat down, "Well, son, Sirius and I will be there. Unfortunately, we'll be among the security cordon. An event this big will be pretty hard to hide from the muggles. About 500 people were working a year just to build the Pitch and its stadium. It'll be huge, I hear, huge enough to hold 100,000 people. We'll have about a hundred Aurors and other Ministry workers there to keep on the lookout for him and control the crowd from doing too much magic."

Harry scowled, "It's a big event, isn't it, big enough to attract Voldemort's attention? You think he may try something during the game, or afterwards?"

"I don't know, Harry," James said quietly, "In the last war, a target this big would have been irresistible for him. But he's been quiet lately. The only sign of activity that could be traced to him was that Dementor attack we had on your birthday. I just don't like it. It's a good thing the Ministry has the sense to have us on guard, even if they don't believe that he's back."

"At any rate," Arthur said, "With me, Remus, Bill, Percy and Charlie around, I don't think we should worry about him for now. We just have to enjoy ourselves there, okay, kids?"

Harry and the others nodded. Harry resolved to be ready in case Voldemort and his cronies decide to spoil the event. He felt Ginny's agreement and was glad to have her with him.

Later that evening, when the Potters got back to Potter Manor, James asked Harry to follow him to their Library.

Harry wondered what was up. He got more apprehensive when James locked the Library's doors and produced a bottle of firewhisky and two shot glasses.

“Er, Dad,” Harry said, “what’s going on?”

“Well, Harry,” James said, “Remember our talk last New Year’s Day? Ever since I found out about the Bond you and Ginny have, I’ve been thinking a lot about this.”

“About what, Dad,” Harry asked, dread creeping up his spine since he suspected the reason why his father had isolated them from his mother and siblings.

“Harry,” James said, “It’s time we had ‘the Talk’. I’ve delayed this too long. Seeing you and Ginny together today brought me to a decision I should have come to that New Year’s Day. I need to tell you about SEX.”

Harry’s eyes widened and he gulped. The next hour and a half was the most uncomfortable hour and a half he ever had. He had never blushed so much before. His father had not been that different. The bottle of firewhiskey was empty by the time they were done.

Fortunately for Harry, he didn’t have to suffer the embarrassment of Ginny listening in as Molly had chosen that moment to have her own ‘Talk’ with her daughter. Needless to say, both teens said quick mental good nights to each other after that. They also hid their newly acquired information behind their mental doors.

The next two weeks flew by quickly, with the kids resuming their early morning work out and jogging sessions. Harry hardly noticed the time as he and Ginny were busy with more spell training and Occlumency. He and Ginny tried their best to spend as much time with Rose as they did with each other.

Ron, on the other hand, hardly complained about not having much time with his mate even when this forced him to spend more time with Hermione. Harry wondered about that but didn’t give it much thought.

Ti, Harry, his mother and three siblings came over to spend the night at the Burrow on the evening before the World Quidditch Cup Finals. Harry and the others would then be able to wake up early before dawn in order to get to the Portkey that would take them to the site of the Cup.

Lily, Andrew and Daisy were staying over to keep Molly company, much to the Weasley matriarch's delight. Harry knew Molly loved having his youngest siblings over.

The children had no problem waking up early, even Ron, due to their early morning jogs. Of course, Ron did complain about the early hour as Bill, Percy and Charlie were still asleep. Since the oldest Weasley boys were apparating there, they didn't have to wake up as early as the rest of them.

As they walked to Stoatshead Hill, where the Portkey was, they ran into Cedric Diggory and his dad, Amos, who worked in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Harry didn't know that the older boy lived near the Weasleys, in spite of having been going to their house for years. It was a bit crowded for twelve people to place a hand on the Portkey which was an old boot but they managed it.

They arrived at the site of the Cup with little mishap and stared in awe at the sea of tents and the huge Pitch in the distance. The utter chaos of the scene drew grins from most of the children.

It took them a while to find the spot they had rented for the night in an area just at the edge of the woods. Arthur pointed out that the Quidditch Pitch was just on the other side of the woods. It took them a while to set up the small tent.

Harry was curious. He had never gone camping before. So in spite of growing up in the Wizarding World, he wondered how such a small tent could fit all thirteen of them.

Harry's eyes widened in awe when he entered the tent. He also felt Ginny's surprise and wonder through their bond.

The inside of the tent looked like a two-story house, with five bedrooms, a kitchen and two bathrooms. The twins took one of the ground floor rooms while Bill, Charlie and Percy would take the other one when they arrived. Harry, Ron and Ti took up one of the second floor rooms while Hermione, Rose and Ginny shared another and Arthur and Remus took the third.

After leaving their things in their respective bedrooms, the eight children set out to explore the huge campsite. They found several of their classmates and friends as they wandered around. They even bought a few souvenirs, though Harry and Ginny laughed at the toy figure of Victor Krum that Ron bought, much to Ron's ire. They also bought some Omnioculars so they could see the action better.

While waiting for the signal to go to the stadium, Harry and his friends met Ludo Bagman who was in charge of Magical Games and Sports. Harry had heard about him from his dad, who knew the man's previous Quidditch career and was amused by Bagman's penchant for gambling. Of course, James never mentioned that last part in front of Lily.

They also met Percy's new boss, Barty Crouch, head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Harry found the older man too stiff and rigid, an opinion Ginny agreed with. They shook their heads at the way Percy fawned over him, offering the man a cup of tea even when he called Percy "Weatherby". Of course, Fred and George were delighted to have this new little tidbit of information to use for teasing their stiff and proper older brother.

As the sun began to set, a gong sounded throughout the campgrounds which Arthur informed them signaled the time to enter the huge stadium.

Their group headed for the Stadium and they were pleased that their proximity to the stadium allowed them to be among the first hundred people inside. As they climbed up to their seats near the top box, they met Minister Fudge who was with the Bulgarian Minister of Magic.

Harry scowled as Fudge made a big show of introducing him to the other man. Luckily, the Bulgarian Minister politely shook his hand and made it a point to shake hands with all of them.

Beside Fudge was a woman that Harry could only describe as toadlike because she had almost no neck, a squat body and a broad, flabby face. She also had mouse-brown hair, a wide and slack mouth and large, slightly bulging round eyes. Harry wondered who she was and asked Mr. Weasley.

"That's Dolores Umbridge, Harry," Arthur whispered to him, "I believe your father and Sirius have a low opinion of her. Well, come to think of it, so do I." Arthur gave him a smile.

"She look like a toad, doesn't she, Harry?" Ginny said to him mentally.

"Yeah," Harry replied, *"she sure does, Gin. It wouldn't take any great feat of magic to turn her into something Trevor would love."*

"Harry! I don't think Neville would like that." Ginny said, giggling in his mind.

"Well, I guess not," he replied, a grin on his face as he gazed at her.

By now they had reached their seats beside the top box. As Harry gazed at that special area, his eyes widened as he saw a familiar looking man with long silver hair in that box, shaking Fudge's hand. It was Lucius Malfoy. He had a smug look on his face. Both Narcissa and Draco were also with him.

"What the hell is that git doing here?" Harry thought, furious that the elder Malfoy was out in the open, *I would have thought he'd rather be with Voldieshorts, kissing his ass.*

He glanced at Arthur who was also glaring at Lucius but remained silent.

"Who knows why he's here, Harry," Ginny's equally furious voice sounded in his mind, *"Don't think about it for now. We'll find out soon enough what the git is up to. Don't do anything to upset Ti now."*

"All right, Gin," Harry told her mentally, *"But the git will pay for what he did to our friend and for his part in Voldemort's return."*

Harry shielded Ti from his former family who ignored their former sibling/son, though Harry thought he saw a brief softening of Narcissa's face when she saw Ti. They stopped playing attention to the Malfoys and listened to Bagman welcome the crowd and introduce the Bulgarian team's mascots – Veelas, a hundred of them.

When the Veelas started to dance to some strange and eerie music, Harry noticed that most of the males began acting strangely. He watched these actions with wonder and consternation. He was especially surprised to see Ron almost leap out of his seat towards them. Even Ti had one leg over the barrier before Remus pulled him back.

Why did they act like that? Harry wondered. How come I didn't?

"It may be the Bond, Harry," Ginny said in his mind, "I read somewhere that Veelas affect males of adolescent age and above with something like a love potion. Affected males act like they are infatuated and would do anything to get closer to the Veela. Look at the expression on Ron's face."

Harry looked at Ron and saw the dazed look on his best friend's face. Of course, he failed to notice the scowl on Hermione's face as she noticed Ron's expression, but Ginny did notice her and hid a smile.

The end of the eerie music broke the spell. Then Bagman continued the program, announcing the Irish team mascots who were leprechauns. Finally, a great roar sounded over the stadium as the teams were announced.

They all joined in the cheers. Ron's shouts got even louder when he spotted Krum. Harry watched Krum on his broom. His fluid motions were unbelievable in someone that big. As the game ran on, Harry focused most of his attention on Krum, watching him move through his Omnioculars and memorizing the numerous maneuvers and tricks the Bulgarian did in the game. Harry thought he could use some of those tricks in the coming season at Hogwarts.

The outcome of the game came as a surprise to most of the people in the stadium. Few people would have guessed that Ireland would win even though Krum caught the snitch. Of course, among those few were Fred and George who had made a bet with Bagman for just such an outcome.

As they watched the celebrations from their tent, Harry felt a prickle of unease and a twinge of pain from his scar. He touched his scar. It felt a bit warm. He looked at his hand and was glad when he saw that

there was no blood on it. The pain was low enough that Ginny didn't feel it though she could feel Harry's unease.

Because of this, they both slept with their wands under their pillows. However, nothing disturbed their sleep and they returned to the Burrow the following day.

Unfortunately, when they entered the Burrow's kitchen, Molly rushed up to them and hugged every one of them so hard they could hardly breathe.

"Oh, thank Merlin you are all back," she said as she embraced Ron, "I was so worried."

"Mum, geroff," Ron said, struggling to pull away from his mother.

"What's wrong, Molly?" Arthur asked, a bit concerned at the slightly hysterical greeting from his wife. From the doorway leading to the living room, he saw Lily Potter, holding her two twins babies, a look of concern on her face as well.

"You mean you don't know, Arthur?" Molly said, surprised, "It was in the *Prophet* just this morning." She turned around, picked up the newspaper, which was on the table and showed them the headline.

Dark Mark sighted after 13 years!

Everyone's eyes widened. Arthur sat down and started reading the lead article. Everyone else started to read it over his shoulder.

Terror in the skies over Hampshire and Wiltshire!

After thirteen years, the Dark Mark appeared in the skies over three houses last night. According to eyewitnesses, the first Dark Mark appeared at 9 o'clock in the evening over the village of Overmatch outside the town of Chippenham in Wiltshire. Unfortunately, because of the Quidditch World Cup, it took over an hour before an Auror team arrived at the site. When they arrived, it was found that the house under the Mark was that of Jasper Billingsley, who worked for the Department for Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Mr. Billingsley, age 45, was found dead in the house along with his wife,

Linda, age 42. Fortunately, their children, Adam, 16, Simon, 11 and Kara, 9 were at the Quidditch World Cup with relatives. Both Mr. and Mrs. Billingsley appeared to have been tortured with the Cruciatus Curse and then killed with the Killing Curse.

The second Dark Mark appeared in the sky over the village of Upswich in Hampshire outside the city of Salisbury at about 11 o'clock. When Aurors finally got to investigate, they found it over the house of Graham Cockrine, head of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. Mr. Cockrine, age 65, was a widower whose two children have families of their own. He lived alone. He appeared to have also been tortured with the Cruciatus before receiving the Killing Curse.

The third Dark Mark appeared in the sky at half past 1 o'clock in the morning near the city of Winchester over the home of Beatrice Edgecombe, head of the Floo Regulation office of the Department of Magical Transportation. She also appeared to have been killed after torture by the Cruciatus Curse.

Now the question is who committed these attacks? Were they Death Eaters? All Ministry officials we contacted have refused comment and....

Everyone was stunned. They sat down in the chairs around the kitchen table.

"Merlin!" Harry said, "So that's why nothing bad happened during the Cup. That bastard was busy elsewhere. With so many Aurors at the Cup, he had a free hand to do what he wanted." No one corrected his language, not even Lily, indicating the level of shock they felt.

"This is bad," Arthur said, slumping in his chair, "If it was You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters who were responsible, then he's starting a new war. He's killed three Ministry workers including a Department Head."

"That's awful," Hermione said, "Do any of you know the Billingsley children?"

“Yeah,” Fred said, quietly, “Adam in our year and plays chaser for the Ravenclaw Quidditch team. He’s a good enough bloke off the Pitch.”

“I guess Simon will be starting at Hogwarts this year,” Ginny said in a soft voice.

“Arthur,” Molly said, “D-d-do you think they may come here?”

“Well, Molly,” Arthur said, “He’s already tried when he sent those Dementors here. But to be safe, we’ll strengthen the wards.” He turned to Bill.

“Sure, Dad,” Bill said, “I don’t have to be back in Egypt for a few more days I can help you with that.”

Harry turned to Lily, “Mum, do you think Potter Manor is protected well?”

“I think so, Harry,” Lily answered, “After all, it’s under the Fidelius Charm. Your father has also set up a large amount of wards around it. I doubt Voldemort can get through without expending a lot of magical power. Speaking of which, I think the five of us better head home. Your father sent an owl an hour ago that he may be late coming home tonight because of this.”

“Mrs. Potter,” Ti said, “What about Sirius? Did he send anything?”

“Yes, Ti,” Lily said, “He sent a note with the same owl. You’ll be staying with us until the term starts. Remus will help you get your trunk and clothes from Grimmauld Place.”

With that, they said their thanks and goodbyes and the Potters left the Burrow for Potter Manor while Remus and Ti went to Grimmauld Place to get Ti’s things.

The next day, Dumbledore came to tell Harry and Ginny that he was suspending their training sessions for the last week of the summer but would resume them when they went back to Hogwarts.

Before Dumbledore left, Harry asked him, “Professor, about the attacks the other night, was Voldemort present in any of them?”

Dumbledore sighed, "I don't know, Harry. It's possible. What I am sure is that those attacks were committed by real Death Eaters. No one else knows how to create the Dark Mark. The spell to create it was personally created by Voldemort himself, probably just before he graduated from Hogwarts. He's the only one who can teach it."

"Do you think there'll be more attacks, Professor?" Ginny asked him.

"I'm not sure, Miss Weasley," Dumbledore said, "I believe these were merely probes. He may be gauging the reaction time of the Aurors and the Ministry. We will have to wait and see what Tom plans next. In the meantime, I think you and Harry should enjoy what is left of the summer with your friends." He now had a smile on his face, "I'm sure you have not yet explored the Bond fully."

Ginny blushed, "Probably not, Professor. We're taking things slow. I doubt our mums will appreciate becoming grandmothers early."

"Ginny!" Harry exclaimed, his face turning red like hers.

Dumbledore smiled, "Well, go on and have fun now."

Harry and Ginny bid him goodbye and went to find Rose and Ti. They all then flooded over to the Burrow to join Ron and Hermione. They also invited Neville and his sister to join them everyday for the last six days of summer.

Rose's birthday was also celebrated at the Burrow with a lunchtime party. This time, aside from the Potters and Weasleys, only Neville, Maggie, Remus, Sirius, Sam Turgis, Luna Lovegood and Colin Creevey were invited.

They enjoyed the food that Molly had prepared with a little help from Lily and Blinky. Afterwards, they helped Rose open her presents.

She received a pair of emerald earrings from her parents and younger siblings. James explained that it had belonged to his mother, Rose's grandmother. Rose hugged her parents with tears in her eyes. Like Harry, she had never known either set of grandparents. The elder Potters had died when James was in his seventh year at

Hogwarts. Now, through the earrings, Rose felt a connection to her Potter grandmother.

Harry and Ginny gave her a pendant shaped like a dragon which was one of Rose's favorite magical creatures. It actually breathed an illusionary cone of fire if you stroked its head. She also hugged her older brother and future sister-in-law.

Sirius, Remus and Sam presented her with her own owl, a yellow-brown barn owl, which Rose named Amber. From Arthur and Molly, she got a lovely green sweater. Hermione's gift was a muggle book on dragons that she thought would interest Rose since it contained muggle concepts of a dragon's physiology and habits.

The rest of the Weasleys including Ron gave Rose a collection of chocolates and joke stuff. Neville, Luna and Colin gave her a lovely wizarding photo of Ginny and her taken on the Hogwarts grounds. The party ended at half past four to allow time for all the children to get home and pack for Hogwarts.

Much later that night, Harry was about to enter the kitchen to get a drink of water when he heard his father's voice from within the kitchen with an angry tone in it. He caught the name of the Headmaster in his father's sentence. Curious, Harry stayed still just outside the door to the kitchen from the dining room and tried to hear the conversation without being detected.

"Albus just won't listen to me, Lily," James said, "He thinks this thing is a good idea, something about international cooperation."

"I know, James," Lily said, "He's been planning this since the start of summer. The Minister also wants it to take place."

James snorted, "Fudge is a fool. He doesn't understand how dangerous it can get for the contestants. All he sees is a way to enhance his image. Something like this would have the press swarming in droves around Hogwarts," He paused for a moment before adding, "Especially if Harry were in it."

"Thank goodness the rules will not allow him to enter," his mother said, relief evident in her voice, "With his magical strength and the

knowledge of those spells he's been learning, I've no doubt he would be chosen." Harry could hear a bit of pride in that last statement, pride in him.

"Well, at least we have that consolation, Lils," James said, "if Voldemort tried anything during the tournament, Harry won't be directly in his path. I just hope Albus knows what he's doing."

Lily sighed, "I hope so, too, James. I trust him but sometimes he tends to get carried away with his ideas."

"Well, it's getting late, dear," James said, "We better get to bed if we want to get up in time to get the children to the station."

Harry hurriedly moved back to the living room to make it appear like he had just come down, just as his parents came out of the dining room.

"Oh, Harry, honey," Lily said, "What are you doing up? It's late."

"I, uh, was feeling thirsty and decided to get a glass of water," Harry answered.

"Well, all right," Lily said, "Just help yourself. Make sure you wash the glass well before putting it away."

"Okay, Mum," Harry replied, avoiding looking them in the eye as his father looked at him speculatively. He hurried into the kitchen. When he finished and went back into the living room, they were gone.

As he lay in his bed, he wondered what his parents had been talking about. He wished Ginny hadn't been asleep already so he could discuss it with her. He wondered if this had something to do with a few things Percy had been hinting at since the Cup about a special Ministry project that his boss, Mr. Crouch and Bagman were involved in.

Finally, Harry gave up thinking about it. He decided to wait for Dumbledore to say something. Maybe the Headmaster would announce it when they got back to Hogwarts. One thing Harry was a bit apprehensive about on returning to Hogwarts was wondering if

he'd have any adventures this coming term like he'd been having every year since he started there. Well, only time would tell.

Chapter 44: Once more at Hogwarts

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

The Potters and Ti arrived at the Platform a full hour before the Weasleys, who came just 5 minutes before the Hogwarts Express was to leave. Ginny provided Harry with a running account of their progress to the King's Cross Station through their mental link. Harry couldn't believe how many times the Weasleys had to return to the Burrow for forgotten items. Rose laughed when Harry told her about that.

Greetings were exchanged all around. Harry gave Ginny a chaste kiss on her cheek after embracing her, conscious of the presence of her mother.

Hermione soon joined them accompanied by her parents and new brother. Five-month old Daniel Granger had brown hair like his sister, though it didn't look bushy yet. Seeing the new Granger beside his brother and sister, Harry wondered if Daniel would be magical like Hermione or be a muggle. Either was possible. But, if Dan went to Hogwarts, he may form a new trio with Andrew and Daisy. *Ah, well, that's for the future*, Harry thought.

Soon the children were saying goodbye to the adults. Harry heard some strange remarks like Bill saying that they were going to have an interesting year and Charlie mentioning that he may see them at Hogwarts soon. Even his mum and Mrs. Weasley had remarked that they would probably be spending Christmas at Hogwarts. These reminded him about the conversation between his parents that he had overheard. Then, there were the dress robes he had packed away last night, which added another layer to the mystery.

Once on board, Harry, Ginny, Rose, Ron and Hermione found an empty compartment while Ti went to sit with his dorm mates and Fred and George went off to find Lee Jordan. Neville and his sister, Maggie, soon joined Harry and the others in the compartment.

Later, as the Hogwarts Express sped through the English countryside under a darkening sky, Harry looked around the compartment. Ron

and Neville were playing a game of Wizarding Chess, Hermione had her head in a book as usual and Rose and Maggie were quietly talking. Harry decided it was a good time to have a mental conversation with Ginny, who was beside him reading a book.

"Gin," Harry asked her mentally, "I think I have an idea what might be going on at Hogwarts."

"Oh?" Ginny said, "How did you come up with this without my knowing it?"

Harry could feel the amusement coming from her, "Well, last night, after you fell asleep, I went down to the kitchen for a drink of water and overheard my parents talking. They were discussing some sort of contest or tournament that Professor Dumbledore wanted to happen for international magical cooperation or some such concept. Dad seemed to think it was a bad idea especially since Fudge wanted it, too."

"A contest?" Ginny asked, "What sort of contest would involve Hogwarts and foster international magical cooperation?"

"I'm not sure, Gin," Harry said, "It must be big since even Bill and Charlie know about it. But my mum also mentioned some sort of rules change that wouldn't let me take part in it. They think I'd be sure to be chosen to be a contestant otherwise. They also think that it's dangerous and could be a target for Voldieshots."

"Wow, it must be huge, then," Ginny said, "Dangerous, huh? Then it's a good thing you won't be a part of it. I want my man in one piece so I can enjoy him."

"Oh, really, Miss Weasley?" Harry said, grinning now, "and how with you enjoy your man?"

She put her book down, turned around and closed the small gap between them. *"Like this,"* she said and brought her lips up against his. Harry spared a glance at Ron before the taste of Ginny's lips and her flowery scent removed all awareness of the universe beyond him and Ginny. Ron's ears were red but he didn't turn from his game toward them.

The rest of the journey passed quickly and they were soon at Hogsmeade Station. Unfortunately, as they alighted from the train, it started to rain heavily. Neville gently guided his sister towards Hagrid and the other first years.

Harry, Rose, Ginny, Ron, Hermione and Neville managed to fit into one of the carriages. They were already quite soaked and glad not to have to cross the lake in the heavy downpour.

As soon as they reached the front steps of the castle, they hurried inside and tried to wring as much of the water out of their clothes as they could.

While waiting to enter the Great Hall, Harry noticed Draco standing among the Slytherins. Draco was staring at Ti who was standing with his fellow second years, chatting. Ti happened to glance in Draco's direction and, to Harry and Ti's astonishment, Draco gave his former brother a polite nod before turning away.

Whoa, wonder what that was about? Harry wondered, That git didn't acknowledge Ti for most of last year.

"Harry, did you notice the nod Draco gave Ti?" Ginny asked Harry in his head.

"Yeah, I did," Harry answered, *"What brought that on? That's the first greeting he's given Ti without a glare or snort."*

"Do you think he's come to accept his brother's a Gryffindor?" Ginny asked, a bit of doubt in her mental voice.

"I'm not sure, Gin," Harry said, *"We'd best be watchful of old Draco. Hey, look at Fred and George."*

The Weasley twins were talking quietly to a golden blonde haired boy in Ravenclaw robes, without any of their characteristic joviality.

"That guy they're talking to seems familiar," Harry said, *"Oh, Merlin. I think that's Adam Billingsley, the eldest son of that couple that got attacked the night of the World Cup."*

"If that's him, then his younger brother must be among the first years crossing the lake," Ginny said, "what a gloomy way to see Hogwarts for the first time. Poor kids, they're orphans now. I wonder where their sister is."

"I think I heard my Dad say that their aunt on their mother's side took custody of her," Harry said, "I think she's a muggle. I hope she's nothing like my Aunt Petunia. According to Mum, she hates anything magical so much. I'd hate to think what she and her husband would have done if I and Rose had to live with them."

"Don't think about that, Harry," Ginny said, "It'll never happen. I don't think your parents will let that happen. If anything happened to them, you, Rose, Daisy and Andrew will stay with us or Sirius."

"Thanks, Gin," Harry said, "Well, enough of the dark thoughts. The doors are opening. Let's get inside. I'm starving."

The students trudged into the Great Hall and took their seats at the proper tables. Harry grasped Ginny's hand under the table as he scanned the staff table. He noticed two empty chairs among the familiar faces. One of them was most likely Professor McGonagall's as she was supervising the Sorting Ceremony for the first years.

"Harry," Hermione said, in a low voice, "Do you have any idea who our Defense against the Dark Arts professor will be this year? Did Professor Dumbledore mention anything this summer?"

"No, Hermione," Harry whispered back, "He never said anything about that. I kinda forgot about it with everything we were doing and all. That's probably why there's an extra empty chair."

"Do you think they found anyone?" Ginny asked, "I really wish Remus hadn't had to leave."

"Yeah, Gin," Harry said, "I do, too. But he has more important work to do." Harry remembered that Remus was now on a special mission for the Order.

At that moment, the doors of the Hall opened again, this time to let the nervous first years in, led by Professor McGonagall. The first

years looked like they had been swimming in the lake and were shivering from a combination of cold and nerves.

The Sorting then started after the Sorting Hat sang another interesting song. Harry listened with only half an ear as Ginny was rubbing his knuckles with her fingers, distracting him quite a bit.

Harry only looked up twice, first when Colin Creevey excitedly introduced his younger brother, Dennis to him and the second time to watch Maggie Longbottom get sorted into Gryffindor, much to her brother's relief. Maggie took her seat between Dennis and Neville, across from Ti. Harry and his friends congratulated the first year girl, who blushed from all the attention.

As soon as the Sorting was done and Professor McGonagall had taken her seat, Professor Dumbledore stood up and let the Feast begin with his words, "Tuck in."

Later, after the last of the food had been consumed, Dumbledore rose to give the usual Start of Term speech, except it was not the usual Start of Term speech.

Harry listened with a mixture of curiosity and outrage as Dumbledore announced the cancellation of the Quidditch Cup. Then before he could explain further, he was interrupted by the arrival of a strange but thoroughly soaked man who turned out to be both one of the most eccentric of Aurors and the new Defense against the Dark Arts professor – Alastor 'Mad Eye' Moody.

Harry had heard many stories about him from his father and Sirius. As he watched the strange man, fascinated by the man's magical eye, Harry wondered how much of those stories were true.

Further thoughts about the new teacher were interrupted as Dumbledore again resumed with his announcements. Harry again experienced a succession of emotions as Dumbledore told the students about the Tri-Wizard Tournament and the rule changes the Ministry had made to restrict the participants.

Later that night, as they lay in separate beds in separate dormitories, Harry and Ginny discussed the night's events.

"It's too bad about the Quidditch Cup, Harry," Ginny said in his mind, "It would have been great to see you try out those moves Krum used during the World Cup."

"Yeah, Ginny," Harry replied, "I'd love to have tried them out. I should have attempted a few of them when we were flying around the Burrow or Potter Manor. I thought then that I would be able to once we were back here. Well, maybe next year."

"I guess," Ginny said. After a few seconds of silence, she said, "So, what do you think of the new Professor for DADA?"

Harry gave her a mental shrug, "I'm not sure. Dad and Sirius used to tell me the strangest stories about him. He was Dad and Sirius' training officer when they joined the Aurors. He has this motto," Harry took on a loud booming voice for a second, "Constant Vigilance! He always screamed that. I wonder if he'll do the same thing with us."

"What's with that blue eye?" Ginny asked, "Wasn't it creepy, the way it moved around separate from the other? I swear it even seemed to go to the back of his head."

"It probably does," Harry said, "Sirius mentioned he'd lost one of his eyes in a battle with several Dark Wizards. One of them threw a cutting curse of some sort at him. He got a magical one to replace it. Very rare, that kind of thing, according to Sirius."

"Well, we'll see," Ginny said, "We get our time tables tomorrow, so we'll know when we have DADA. Harry?" Ginny's mental voice got serious all of a sudden.

"Yeah, Gin?" Harry asked, "What is it?"

"About the Tri-Wizard," Ginny said, "You won't try to get in, will you?"

"I don't know," Harry said, his mental voice a little quiet, "We don't know who the impartial judge is. It'll be difficult to come up with a way to fool him or her if we don't know who he or she is."

"Please, Harry," Ginny said, "Promise me you won't try to get in. Remember what your mother said. Even by yourself, you're powerful enough to get in, if your name was submitted."

"Yeah, I guess so," Harry said.

"So, please, don't try to enter, for me. I don't know how dangerous the tasks they plan will be, but if you were out there, I'd feel and see it through our Bond. I don't know if I could take that. It's one thing to be right there beside you like last term with Wormtail. But if you were alone there, facing who knows what, I don't know if I could stand not being able to help you."

Harry was touched by how deeply Ginny felt about it. He knew how she felt since he had felt that way when Wormtail had kidnapped her a few short months ago.

"All right, Gin," he said, "I promise, no matter what anyone may say, I won't enter the Tri-Wizard Tournament. I swear on Merlin's honor. All right?"

Ginny sighed, *"Okay, Harry. Thank you."* She yawned then, *"Sorry, I'm getting tired. See you in the morning, love. Good night."*

"Good night, Ginny," Harry said. As he felt her fall asleep, Harry didn't feel sleepy yet himself.

In spite of his promise to Ginny, he couldn't help wonder how it would feel to become the Tri-Wizard Champion. He imagined himself standing in the middle of the Quidditch Pitch raising the Trophy over his head to the cheers of the entire school.

He sighed. It was a good dream, to have an achievement all his own, something separate from his scar, Voldemort and the prophecy. Maybe he could try, the next time they held it. At the moment, he couldn't think of a way to make him seem seventeen already.

He sighed again and closed his eyes.

The following days were hectic and strange again for Harry and his friends. After all, Harry still had Divination. He groaned when he

found that he was still Trelawney's favorite target for most gruesome death predictions.

Predictably, Hagrid had them studying another dangerous creature – Blast-ended Skrewts.

When their first DADA class came up the following Thursday, Harry and his fellow fourth years were horrified by Moody's demonstrations of the three Unforgivables. Harry knew that even Aurors were not allowed to use those three spells except under very special circumstances. He hoped that Moody had special permission from Dumbledore to teach it to them.

Then, just as the students were starting to leave the DADA classroom at the end of the period, Moody said, "Mr. Potter, a moment please."

"All right, Professor," Harry said, wondering what the ex-Auror wanted. He turned to Hermione and Ron, "I'll see you two later."

Harry approached Moody who was seated at his desk, "You wanted to see me, Professor?"

Moody eyed Harry with his magical eye for a moment before answering, "Yes, Mr. Potter. I have something to discuss with you. Take a seat." He waved his wand and a chair came up behind Harry.

Sitting down, Harry asked, warily, "What is it, sir?"

"Well, Potter," Moody said, "I bet you're wondering why I took this job. I'm sure you've heard stories about me from your father and that godfather of yours, stories that would make you think I wouldn't care to teach a bunch of kids, let alone a whole school."

Harry shrugged, "Well, sir, I guess the whole school is wondering."

"I'll tell you why," Moody said, gruffly, "You. You're the real reason I accepted this job. I know Voldemort is back and I have a feeling you'll be the one to get rid of him. You did it once. You'll do it again, with the proper training."

Harry was surprised by the faith the older man seemed to have in him.

“Surprised you, didn’t I?” Moody asked, “Well, ever since that night when Voldemort attacked you and your parents, I wondered how you survived the killing curse. As I said earlier in class, you’re the only one to ever do that. After thinking about it for a long time, I’ve come to the conclusion that there was a purpose to that. I believe the purpose was to make you the one who would finally put an end to that monster.”

Harry was again surprised. He wondered if Moody knew the prophecy but decided he didn’t and had only come to his conclusion after careful thought.

When Harry didn’t say anything, Moody said, “However, for that to happen, you’ll need training. For that matter, every single one of your fellow students will need training in order to fight. Voldemort won’t spare anyone when he finally resumes the war he was waging. The training you’ll need will take time. For now, you need to know as much about the Dark Arts as you can. That’s where I come in. Then, maybe later in the year, we can start on some actual spells. Dumbledore told me that you’ve already been getting some extra training from him, your father, godfather and Remus Lupin. That’s good. I’ll add to that. But for now, I wanted you to know why I’m really here and that there are people who know the truth about Voldemort. We’re with you.”

“Thanks, Professor,” Harry said, touched by his support.

“Now, go on and get to dinner,” he said, waving his hand in a dismissive gesture.

“Thank you, Professor,” Harry said, leaving the room.

“*Now that was certainly interesting,*” Harry heard Ginny’s voice say in his mind.

“*I’ll say,*” Harry said, as he walked down the corridors on the way to the Great Hall, “*do you think Dumbledore told him about the prophecy?*”

“*I don’t think so, Harry,*” Ginny replied, “*I think he came up with that all on his own.*”

"I thought so, too. Well, at least that means the Headmaster can get us the help we need without having to spew out the bloody thing."

"Harry," Ginny said, a bit of caution in her tone, *"When are you going to tell Ron, Rose and Hermione about Trelawney's Prophecy?"*

Harry stopped walking and leaned against the wall. The corridor was otherwise empty.

"Harry?" Ginny asked again. A couple of seconds later, she appeared at the end of the corridor and walked slowly up to Harry, who still hadn't answered her.

Ginny looked up at him as she wrapped her arms around him. She could feel the turmoil in his thoughts as he thought of the Prophecy given by Trelawney and the one given by his own sister.

"Harry, please, talk to me."

"I don't know, Gin," Harry said in her mind finally, *"I don't want them to hate me."*

"Why would they do that, Harry?"

"You heard the Prophecy Trelawney gave, Gin. 'Neither can live while the other survives.' That means I have to kill him. Either I get murdered or I become a murderer. How else will they feel about a murderer?"

He gently moved out of her embrace and walked over to a window, which overlooked the grounds. He stared out the window, his mind still in thinking about the Prophecy. He felt Ginny wrap her arms around his waist again and lean her head against his back.

"Harry, there's no way they'd hate you for killing Voldemort." Ginny said in his mind, *"It wouldn't be murder since he's not human anymore. It would be like getting rid of a mad dog."*

Harry stayed silent but Ginny could feel him calming down and considering her words, so she continued.

“What about me, Harry? I understand what Trelawney’s Prophecy requires you to do. I don’t like it but I accept it. I haven’t loved you any less for it. There’s no way I’m going to leave you because of it, Bond or no Bond.”

Finally, Harry sighed and turned around within her arms to face her. Slowly, he wrapped his arms around her. He was tall enough now to rest his chin on her shoulder.

“Thanks, Gin,” Harry said, “To be honest, if you hadn’t heard the Prophecy through our connection, I’m not sure if I would have told you. I guess I owe it to them to know what they may be getting into.”

“Don’t forget Rose’s prophecy, Harry. We haven’t given it much thought lately but if we can tell Ron and Hermione about it, too, then Hermione can help us figure it out. I think I know who a few of the people are.”

“I guess so. Okay, Gin. We can tell them this weekend. I’ll find a place we can talk. Now, can we get some dinner.”

Ginny grinned, “Sure. Let’s go.” She took his hand and led the way to the Great Hall.

The following Sunday morning, Harry, Ginny, Rose, Ron and Hermione walked down to Hagrid’s hut, ostensibly so they could visit the half-giant. Once there, Harry thanked Hagrid for letting them use his house for some private conversation.

“It’s all righ’, Harry,” Hagrid said, “I know how hard it is ter get some privacy here.” He stood up as they sat down, “Well, there’s some tea on the stove and scones in the oven. Just help yerselves. I’ve got ter check on some things in the Fores’ but I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Thanks again, Hagrid,” Harry said as the large man left through the back door.

“All right, Harry,” Hermione said, “What’s so important we needed to sneak off and hide from the rest of the student body?”

“Well,” Harry said, “earlier this summer, my parents and Professor Dumbledore revealed the real reason why Voldemort, oh get over it, Ron, why Voldemort attacked us that Halloween night. It seems there was a prophecy made concerning someone who could get rid of him.” Harry then recited Trelawney’s prophecy.

The hut was silent as the implications of the prophecy sunk into the heads of Ron, Rose and Hermione. Harry watched them carefully, looking for signs of disgust or revulsion.

It was Ron who broke the silence, “Wow! Bloody hell!”

“Ron! Language!” Hermione said then she added, shrugging her shoulders, “However, that about sums up how I feel myself.”

“You two don’t find me disgusting?” Harry asked in a soft tone, “Aren’t you disgusted with me having to murder someone, even Voldemort?”

“What!” Hermione said, “No, Harry, of course not. That man is a monster. He’s already killed hundreds in the last war. Someone has to stop him. It won’t be murder since he isn’t human anymore.”

“Yeah, Harry,” Ron said, “I’m not too happy that it’ll be you because you could die. But you’ve already stopped him, what, three times already? I’m glad there’s a chance he’ll be stopped permanently. Considering the power you have, I’m sure you can do it.”

“Thanks, you guys,” Harry said, “That means a lot to me.”

He then looked at Rose, who was sitting still and hadn’t said a word yet, “Sis, are you all right?”

She shrugged, “Yeah, I am, Harry. I guess I’m not surprised by this, considering what you’ve already done and what I am.”

“What you are?” Ron said, his blue eyes narrowing, “What does that mean, Rose?”

“I-I’m a seer, Ron,” Rose said, looking down at her feet.

“A seer?” Ron asked, “What exactly is a seer?”

“As a seer, I occasionally see what will happen in the future,” Rose said, “More of glimpses actually, usually of other people’s future.”

Ron’s eyes widened and his eyebrows shot up his forehead, “Bloody hell! Ow! Hermione!” Hermione had punched him on the arm.

“Language, Ron,” Hermione said, “Being surprised isn’t an excuse for vulgarity.”

“Well, you don’t seem surprised by that last bit Rose said,” Ron said, rubbing his arm.

Hermione’s cheeks turned red, “Er, well, she told me months ago.”

“What!” Ron exclaimed. He turned to Harry and Ginny, “I bet she told you two, too, didn’t she?”

Harry and Ginny shrugged.

“Bloody hell,” Ron said, slumping backward in the armchair he was seated in, “Just great. My best mate’s in a prophecy and shares a Soul Bond with my baby sister then his baby sister is a seer. What else is there?”

“Hey! We’re not babies!” Ginny and Rose said, together.

“Er, there is more, Ron,” Harry said, “There’s something else you and Hermione don’t know about Rose. Sis, is it all right if I tell them?”

“I guess so,” Rose said, “It is part of my being a seer, anyway.”

Harry turned to look at Ron and Hermione, “Rose sort of made a prophecy the night of my birthday when we got home to Potter Manor.”

“A prophecy?” Hermione asked, “What did it say?”

“Well,” Harry said, “I think it goes something like this.”

They gather now, they who would stand by the Chosen One,

His six companions, bonded by love deep and true

The Soul Mate, his other half, his strength

The Seer, his sister in blood, his guide

The Wise Lady, his sister in all but blood, his font of knowledge

The Strategist, his best friend, his right hand

The Green Lord, his equal in power, his general

The White Ram, saved from Evil by him, his left hand

Training they need together, to defeat the Dark Lord

Let not one be lost or all will be for naught

And the Dark Lord will defeat the Chosen one

"Is that about it?" Harry asked Ginny, mentally.

"I think so, Harry," Ginny answered mentally.

"Wow," Ron said, bewildered, "What do you think it means? Who are those people it mentions?"

"I think the Chosen One is Harry since the Dark Lord is obviously Voldemort," Hermione said, "Quit that shuddering, Ron. Really, how can you be a Gryffindor if a mere name scares you?"

"Well, it's sort of reflex action and seeing my mum and dad react to that name," Ron said sheepishly.

Hermione shook her head, "Anyway, if the Dark Lord is Voldemort and the Chosen One is Harry, the six companions are the ones who'll help Harry defeat Voldemort."

"That's what I thought, too," Ginny said, "So, the soul mate is probably me and the seer is Rose as she's his 'sister in blood'. But who are the other four?"

"I think the next two lines talk of Ron and Hermione," Harry said, "The Wise Lady is Hermione and the Strategist is Ron."

“Are you sure, Harry?” Hermione asked, “I mean I’ve got intelligence and knowledge. But that part about ‘sister in all but blood’. Is that really talking about me?”

Harry looked at her with a smile, “Of course, Hermione. I’ve thought of you always as more than a friend, though not, er, romantically. To me, you’re as much a sister as Rose. You’re like the older, more mature sister I’ve never had.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Hermione said, a blush on her cheeks and tears glistening in her eyes, “I guess I have thought of you as a brother, too. That’s still true even if we have Danny now.”

He smiled at her then turned to Ron, “And you have always been my best friend. You’re brilliant in wizarding chess and all those muggle and wizarding strategy games we used to play when we were kids. I have no doubt that you’re the Strategist.”

“Wow, thanks, mate,” Ron said, awed by Harry’s praise, “I guess I am quite good in planning stuff like that.”

“All right,” Rose said, a smile on her face, “We’ve got those settled. What about the next two lines? Who are the Green Lord and the White Ram?”

“I’m not sure, Rose,” Harry said, “I’d say they’re close to me, as close as the four of you. But I don’t know. I doubt it’s any of our parents or their friends. It just doesn’t fit any of them.”

“Let me think about for a while, Harry,” Hermione said, “Maybe I can come up with some candidates.”

“All right, Hermione,” Harry said, “I’m glad you three know now about both prophecies. Now, we can continue our training together. Let’s have some tea while we wait for Hagrid to get back.”

They waited for Hagrid and spent the rest of the morning visiting with him for real. They then headed back to the castle for lunch

As they walked into the Entrance Hall, they saw numerous students coming in as well. Unfortunately, among them were Draco and his cronies.

"Oho," Draco said, "If it isn't Scarhead, his halfblood sister, two weasels and a mudblood."

"Shut it, Malfoy," Harry said, "We don't have time to deal with your crap."

"Ooh," Draco said, smirking, "getting a little shirty, aren't you, Potter?" Then, he saw the linked hands of Harry and Ginny, "Well, well, aren't you and the little weasel cozy, Potter? Looks like I was right about you two that time in the bookstore, eh? Couldn't you have done better than a Weasley? I know you're friends with his pathetic brother but to take his sister as your girlfriend? Really! Well, your families are just the same, mugglelovers and blood traitors."

Harry's hand tightened on his wand under his robes.

"No, Harry!" Ginny's mental voice sounded in his mind, squeezing his hand in hers, *"Don't start anything. Leave him to me."*

"Oh, all right, Gin, this time. I'll not have him insult you."

Ginny looked at Malfoy, "Really original with your insults, aren't you, Malfoy? At least our families care for each other. What about yours? Your father is an arrogant, cruel man who bribed his way out of Azkaban. Your mother has her nose so high in the air I'm afraid she may pass out from lack of oxygen."

Draco's face was red as he started becoming angry, "Shut up about my family! The Malfoys are a proud and honorable pureblood family."

"So you're just as sensitive about your family as the rest of us, eh Draco?" Harry said, "It's too bad you disowned the best part of it. Ti would have given more honor and pride to your family than the rest of you." With that, Harry and the others turned from the three Slytherins and started walking away.

All of a sudden, they heard a shout, "OH NO YOU DON'T, LADDIE!" There was a loud bang behind them. When they turned around they saw Moody descending the main stairs, his wand out and pointed at a snow-white ferret that was standing exactly where Draco had been.

Moody then started to admonish the ferret as it bounced up and down under the direction of Moody's wand. Unfortunately, Professor McGonagall happened along and discovered that the bouncing ferret was a transfigured student. Her scolding was enough to embarrass the ex-Auror and drive the watching children into the Great Hall.

Harry and his friends had a good laugh over that. Even Ti was amused by what had befallen his ex-brother. They spent the rest of the afternoon doing homework.

At the start of dinner, Dumbledore sent a message to Harry, asking him and Ginny to see him an hour before curfew in his office. They went to see him under Harry's invisibility cloak.

When they got there, the Headmaster told them that starting the following week, they would continue their Occlumency lessons every Sunday afternoon. Harry told him about their interpretation of Rose's prophecy.

Dumbledore agreed with their ideas of the identities of the Soul mate, Seer, Wise Lady and Strategist. He told them that he had an idea of who the Green Lord and White Ram were but said that it could wait until the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

The days passed and it was again Hermione's birthday, her fifteenth. The Gryffindors once again held a party for their resident genius. Since it was a Friday, they didn't have to worry about classes the next day.

Harry and Ginny gave Hermione a magical hairclip in the shape of a butterfly that fastened itself. Rose gave her some muggle hair styling items. Ron and Neville gave her a gift certificate to the bookstore in Hogsmeade. Even Lavender and Parvati gave her some cosmetics. The other Gryffindors gave her various chocolates and candies.

As September passed into October, the fourth years found their workload increased quite a lot. McGonagall explained to them that this was to prepare them for their O.W.L.S. which they would be taking the following year.

Harry and his fellow fourth years were further shocked in DADA when Moody started to cast the Imperius Curse on them with the purpose of teaching them to overcome it. Harry found himself able to throw off the curse after four tries. The rest were not as successful. The worse was Draco whom Moody had performing all sorts of acrobatic tricks while he was under the curse.

Then, on the last Monday of October, a large notice appeared in the Entrance Hall announcing that the students from the other two Wizarding schools participating in the tournament, Beauxbatons in France and Durmstrang in Bulgaria, would arrive the following Friday which was the day before Halloween.

Harry remembered that the champions of each school would be chosen on Halloween.

Soon, the whole school was abuzz over speculations on what the students from the other schools would be like.

Chapter 45: The Choosing of the Champions

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

Harry sat with the rest of his schoolmates in the heavily decorated Great Hall, watching the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. The foreign students had arrived less than an hour ago on board a huge carriage drawn by elephantine winged horses and a large galleon, respectively. All of them were in their seventh year, except for one of the girls from Beauxbatons who looked even younger than a first year. It came as a surprise to the Hogwarts students that Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian National Quidditch team seeker was among the Durmstrang candidates. Ron had practically fainted over seeing his idol, much to Harry and Ginny's amusement and Hermione's disgust.

Another surprise was seeing the Headmistress of Beauxbatons, Madame Maxime, who was one of the largest women they had ever seen, even taller than Hagrid. In addition, one of the girls from her school had elicited a strange reaction from the male students of Hogwarts, a reaction Harry found disturbingly similar to the one he had seen at the Quidditch World Cup when the Veelas had been dancing.

"She must be part Veela," Ginny had commented mentally to him when she detected that particular thought in Harry's mind.

Soon, Professor Dumbledore interrupted Harry's thoughts as he stood up. The teachers' table was more crowded than usual since there were more people seated there. To Dumbledore's right sat Cornelius Fudge. To the headmaster's left were Madame Maxime and the relatively new Headmaster of Durmstrang, Tadeus Propanov.

Propanov had been assistant headmaster for many years and only been recently elevated to his present position at the beginning of the present term. It was rumored that his predecessor, Igor Karkaroff, had disappeared mysteriously near the end of the previous term.

Barty Crouch and Ludo Bagman were also present, being seated to the right of Fudge.

Dumbledore welcomed the foreign students and the Ministry officials then opened the feast. As usual, the food was excellent. One of the French students commented that it was better than the food at their school, though a few of his classmates didn't touch some of the English specialties, like the steak and kidney pie.

Once everyone had their fill, Dumbledore rose again. He explained the history of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Then, Mr. Crouch brought out a large box and set it on a table in front of the teachers' table. He then opened it, revealing an intricately carved wooden cup.

"This is the Goblet of Fire," Dumbledore said, "This is the method by which the champions from each school are chosen." He then proceeded to explain the mechanism for entering oneself in the tournament and the other rules of the tournament, including a warning that someone who entered the tournament entered into a binding magical contract and couldn't back out no matter what happened. After pausing a few seconds to let that sink in, he sent them all off to bed.

As they trudged to their dormitories, Harry could hear Fred and George speculating on how to get past the age line Dumbledore was putting around the Goblet of Fire in order to keep anyone under seventeen out of the tournament. He shook his head at their audacity.

The next morning was full of excitement as the eligible students put their names into the Goblet which was set up in the Entrance Hall. There was a nice moment of amusement when Fred and George attempted to circumvent Dumbledore's age line by using an aging potion and they ended up being thrown out of the circle formed by the age line and each receiving a distinguished looking white beard.

As they ate breakfast, Harry noticed that an eagle owl had landed beside Draco. The Malfoy heir removed the letter attached to the owl and read it. Harry was intrigued when Draco's face became pale after reading it.

Before he could think further of it, he heard a commotion from the door and saw a bunch of older Gryffindors cheering and laughing as they entered the Great Hall. Among them was Angelina Johnson, who was grinning. When she reached the Gryffindor table, the older

girl announced that she had just placed her name in the Goblet. Harry and the rest of their House congratulated her.

Since it was a Saturday and they had no homework that needed immediate work, Harry and his friends went down to the grounds near Hagrid's hut to do some exercises and martial arts. After lunch in the Great Hall, they went back to the Gryffindor Common Room to relax.

After Ron had demolished him in a couple of chess games, Harry invited Ginny to take a walk by the lake. Rose and Hermione decided to go out of the common room with them on the way to the library. As they were walking, Harry heard a gasp to his left. Turning in that direction, Harry was alarmed to see Rose staring at him, her face even paler than Malfoy's had been that morning.

"Rose, what is it?" Harry asked, hurrying to his sister's side.

"H-harry," Rose said, "I've just had a v-vision and we-we have to talk to the Headmaster right now." She was visibly trembling.

Harry quirked an eyebrow but didn't question his sister. Instead, he gently took hold of Rose's hand and lead her towards Dumbledore's office, Ginny and Hermione following them.

When they reached the gargoyle, guarding the stairs to the Headmaster's office, Harry didn't hesitate to give the password he and Ginny had been given for their lessons. The four Gryffindors then immediately ascended the stairs to the main office.

As they stood at the door, they heard Dumbledore's voice bid them to enter.

"Ah, Harry, Miss Weasley, Miss Potter, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said, a smile on his face, "Please sit down. What can I do for you?"

"Actually, sir," Harry said, as he sat down in a couch with Ginny by his side, "Rose said she needed to speak to you."

"Miss Potter," Dumbledore said, "What's wrong?"

"I-I-I had a vision, Professor," Rose said, in a low voice, "just a few minutes ago while I was walking in the corridors."

"Oh?" Dumbledore asked, "What did you see in this vision, Rose?"

"I s-saw you receive a name from the Goblet of Fire," Rose said, "The name you read was Harry's." She was now looking at her brother with frightened eyes.

Dumbledore's eyes widened and he turned to Harry whose own eyes had widened, "Harry, did you put your name in the Goblet?"

"NO!" Harry said, loudly. His voice rang through the office.

"Are you sure, Harry?" Dumbledore said, "You didn't ask an older boy to place your name in the Goblet?"

"No, Professor," Harry said, "I promised Ginny that I wouldn't try to enter the tournament. I would never go back on a promise to her, or to anyone."

Dumbledore looked intently at Harry for a few seconds before turning away and sighing.

After a few moments of silence, Hermione asked, "Professor, do you think Rose's vision will come true? You don't think it's just a possibility of what may happen?"

"I don't think so, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said, "After the prophecy she has given, I don't think any visions Rose will see will be false."

"So that's it then?" Harry asked, "Somehow, I'm going to be in this tournament?"

Dumbledore sighed again, "I believe so, Harry. Someone has decided that you are to take part in this tournament."

"Someone?" Harry said, "Hah! Do we have to ask who that someone is? Hands down, it's Moldieshorts." There was a bitter, resigned tone in his voice.

"Wait a minute," Ginny said. She stood up and started advancing on the Headmaster, her gait much like a cat stalking its prey. "You mean to tell me that you're going to let this happen?" Her voice started rising with every word. "You're going to let him take part in a tournament where he could get HURT, MUCH LESS, DIE! JUST BLOODY GREAT! WAIT TILL MY MUM HEARS THIS, BOTH OF THEM!" She then stood in front of Dumbledore, glaring at him.

Harry's heart swelled upon hearing Ginny's implied reference to his mother as one of her mothers. He also felt proud of how defensive of him she was.

Hermione and Rose, on the other hand, just stared at Ginny, shocked that she had shouted at Dumbledore, someone considered to be one of the greatest wizards alive.

Dumbledore calmly watched the youngest Weasley for a few moments then he said, "Now, now calm down, Ginevra," When Ginny bristled at his use of her despised given name, he said, "Ginny, please listen to me first. As you have seen in the amusing way your brothers attempted to enter, it is impossible to get pass the age line if one is underage. It will take great magic to fool the Goblet of Fire so that Harry is chosen as one of the contestants. If it is indeed Voldemort who has planned this, then he has a purpose that we must discover. If we somehow prevent Harry's inclusion as a contestant, he will simply make another plan, one we will be unable to prevent. At least, with the spells you both have been learning this past summer, Harry will be better prepared to face the three tasks of the tournament."

The four students considered Dumbledore's points. Finally, Ginny sighed then she said, "All right, Professor. I guess there's nothing else we can do. I hope that with what you've taught us so far, Harry can handle whatever is going to happen. Can you tell us what the tasks will be?"

Dumbledore shook his head, though he was smiling, "Unfortunately, Ginny, in fairness to the other contestants, I cannot divulge that information. I must treat Harry equally with the other school's

champions. One of the rules of the tournament states that none of the heads of the school may help their contestant."

"So what do we do now, sir," Hermione asked.

"Well, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said, "It will be time for the Feast and the picking of the school champions in less than two hours. I suggest that the four of you return to your common room and try to relax."

"Relax?" Harry said, "Are you bloody mad? Oops, sorry, Professor. But, how can I relax when I know my name is going to come out of that bloody Goblet? I can imagine what the rest of the school will think when that happens. It'll be like second year again when they thought I was Slytherin's heir. Then there are the other schools. This is going to be bloody awful." He slumped into his chair and looked down at the floor.

"Don't worry, Harry," Ginny's voice came up in his mind, as she took his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, *"Our little band isn't going to be like that. We'll be behind you. You won't be alone in this."* She then sent him soothing thoughts through their bond.

Harry felt himself calming down and sighed. He looked up at Dumbledore, "All right, Professor. I'll try and looked surprised when it happens. I hope you're happy. Just wait till Mum hears this." He was a little satisfied on seeing Dumbledore visibly wince.

Harry stood up, dragging Ginny with him and left the office. Hermione and Rose gave a quiet goodbye to Dumbledore before following the couple.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair for a moment before turning to Fawkes who was on his perch beside his desk.

"I need you to deliver a message for me, old friend," he told the phoenix.

Hermione and Rose followed Harry and Ginny as they headed outside to the grounds, not stopping until they reached the tree under

which the young couple had had their Valentine's Day picnic a few months back.

Harry sat with his back against the tree. Ginny sat beside him and leaned against him, her arms wrapped around him. Hermione and Rose sat down beside them, worry over Harry evident in their eyes.

Ginny could feel the turmoil in his mind. Finally, she forced him to lay his head in her lap and started to run her hands in his hair as she continued sending soothing thoughts to him.

How much time passed was unknown to the four until Hermione noticed that it was getting dark. She reluctantly approached her two friends.

"Harry, Ginny," she said, "It's starting to get late. It'll be time for the Feast soon. I know you don't want to go anymore but it'll look suspicious when your name gets pulled out of the Goblet."

Harry looked at her for a moment then reluctantly got up slowly. He reached down and pulled Ginny up. Without a word, the two walked slowly back to the castle. Hermione and Rose exchanged a worried glance and followed the bonded pair.

As they reached the front doors, they saw the students from Durmstrang approaching, Krum and Propanov in the lead. They noticed that the Goblet was no longer in the Entrance Hall.

They saw it when they entered the already filling Great Hall, resting on the teachers' table, in front of Dumbledore's empty chair. The four younger Gryffindors sat down beside Fred and George, across from Ron, Neville and Ti.

"Where were you four?" Ron asked, leaning across the table. "You were gone for hours."

"We were sitting by the lake," Hermione answered almost immediately, "just talking. We forgot the time."

"Talking, eh?" Fred said, his eyebrows wagging, "I bet Harry and Ginny weren't just talking."

“Fred!” Ginny said, blushing, her hand still in Harry’s.

The light banter of the siblings turned Harry’s attention from the Goblet and his worried anticipation. He started to eat, suddenly finding himself ravenous.

Ginny sensed his change in mood and was grateful. She had been afraid that he would not eat and be morose all evening, drawing attention to himself.

Finally, the plates were cleared of food and Dumbledore stood up, causing the Hall to fall silent. The other people at the teachers’ table had different expressions on their faces, ranging from Madame Maxime and Propanov’s tense expectant looks to Bagman’s beam to Mr. Crouch’s bored indifference.

After a few words on where the chosen champions would go upon being named, Dumbledore lowered the lights of the Great Hall and the Goblet flared brighter than before, its bluish flames dancing wildly.

Now that the moment had arrived, Harry found himself barely listening to Dumbledore. He was dimly aware of Krum being named the Durmstrang champion and the Veela girl, Fleur Delacour being named the Beauxbatons champion.

Finally, he heard Dumbledore clearly say, “The Hogwarts champion is.....Harry Potter!”

Harry felt numb, even if he had been expecting it. Now that it had happened, he felt cold and terrified. He could hear the noise level in the Hall abruptly rise as the rest of the Hogwarts students started talking.

He looked at Ron who was staring at him, eyes wide. Neville and Ti were the same. Most of those at the Gryffindor table were also staring at him, open-mouthed.

“I-I didn’t place my name in,” he said, “I don’t want to be in this tournament.”

"Harry," Ginny said in his mind, "Professor Dumbledore is calling you up to join the other champions. HARRY!"

Harry winced and looked around at the teachers' table. Dumbledore was beckoning to him. McGonagall was at his side, whispering furiously to him. Madame Maxime and Propanov were eyeing him with narrowed eyes. Bagman looked confused while Crouch seemed to still be bored.

Harry stiffly got up and walked slowly to the teachers' table. He could feel the eyes of the rest of the students following him. So far, there had been no applause, which was something he had expected.

He was dimly aware of Ginny quietly telling Ron off. *No, Ron, he didn't put his name in. You know he couldn't have hidden that from me if he tried. He doesn't really want in this thing.*

By now, he had reached the teachers' table. Dumbledore directed him to a door behind that table. As he passed them, Harry noted the shocked looks of most of the teachers, including Hagrid. Snape, however, looked at him with loathing. Moody simply stared at him, with both eyes, even the bluish one.

Harry went through the door to find himself in a smaller room, lined with portraits of wizards and witches and a fireplace blazing comfortably opposite him.

The other two champions were standing in front of the fireplace, conversing in low tones. They turned around upon hearing him enter, looks of surprise and consternation on their faces.

"What is zis?" the French girl asked, "Is zer a problem wiz ze 'ogwarts champion?"

"Er, um, I'm him," Harry said, lamely, "I mean, I'm the Hogwarts champion."

Krum and the girl stared at him, their eyes wide.

Before they could say anything, the door opened and several people came in, led by Professor Dumbledore. Those who followed him in

the room were Bagman, Mr. Crouch, Madame Maxime, Propanov, Moody, Professor McGonagall and Snape.

"Madame Maxime!" Fleur said immediately, "What iz 'appening? Zis little boy is saying that he is ze 'ogwarts champion."

Harry bristled at Fleur's statement. *Me, a little boy?*

"Ooh!" Wait till I get my hands on that French hussy! How dare he call my Harry a little boy!"

Harry smiled inwardly and felt a warmth inside himself from the possessiveness coming from his favorite redhead, *"Thanks, Gin. Don't mind her. Let's see what Dumbledore does to appease the other school heads. They seemed a bit ticked off."* He turned his attention to the conversation between the adults.

"I demand an explanation, Dumbly-dorr!" Madame Maxime said, "How can zis boy compete? He iz too small to be seventeen." She turned to Harry, "How old are you, boy?"

Harry felt irritated by the imperious tone she was addressing him in but answered anyway, "I'm fourteen, Madame."

"Hah!" Propanov said, "I thought your Age Line would keep out younger contestants, Dumbledore. If we had known, we would have brought younger but equally capable students."

"I don't know about capability, Propanov," Snape said, "But Potter is notorious for breaking rules and crossing lines he should not ever since he started here..."

"Enough, Severus," Dumbledore said, "This will not resolve our problem." He faced Harry and gave him a wink that the others did not see.

"Harry," Dumbledore asked, "did you put your name in the Goblet or have an older student put it for you?"

“No, Professor!” Harry answered, “I have no idea how my name came into the Goblet. Isn’t there any way I can withdraw and another contestant from Hogwarts chosen?”

“I’m afraid not, Mr. Potter,” Bagman said, “The rules say that once a person’s name is pulled out of the Goblet, he or she is obliged to compete. There’s no dropping out or withdrawing. Barty?” He turned to Mr. Crouch.

“Yes, I’m afraid Ludo is right, young man,” Crouch said, a smile appearing on his face for a moment before he continued in a curt voice, “According to the rules, you are placed in a binding magical contract the moment your name is selected by the Goblet. There is no getting out of it. You are therefore the official representative of Hogwarts in this Tri-Wizard Tournament.”

Harry sighed and muttered, “Well, it was worth a try.”

Bagman then said, smiling widely, “Well, now that it’s all cleared up, we can go on to the instructions for our champions. Barty, care to do the honors of explaining the first task?”

“Yes, of course,” Crouch said. He faced the three chosen champions, “The first task is designed to test your bravery and ability to think quickly. Courage in the face of danger is an important trait for a wizard. This task will be performed in front of the other students and a panel of judges on the twenty-fourth of November. Until then, you will not be informed of the nature of the task.”

The eyes of Harry and the other two champions widened in surprise over this information.

“Now,” Mr. Crouch continued, “let me inform you of some other rules. In the course of the tournament, the champions will not be allowed to ask or receive any help of any sort from your teachers to complete the tasks. You will face the first challenge with nothing more than your wands. Information on the second task will be given to you after the first task. Due to the demands of the tasks and the Tournament as a whole, the three champions will be exempted from end-of-year tests. Do any of you have any questions?”

When none of the three said anything, Crouch turned back to Dumbledore, "I think that's it, Albus. I think I will turn in now. This evening's events have tired me."

"Of course, Barty," Dumbledore said, "Argus will show you to your room in the Guest Wing."

Bagman tried to get Madame Maxime and Propanov to join him for a nightcap but the two headpersons simply collected their respective champion and exited the room.

Harry watched them go then noticed that Dumbledore was calling him.

"Harry," Dumbledore said, "I think you should go back to Gryffindor Tower. Doubtless, your housemates will want to celebrate. Just don't stay up too late." His characteristic twinkle was in his eye. "And don't worry about your parents. I will inform them."

Harry nodded, thankful he didn't have to face his mother's wrath yet, and left the room. The Great Hall was empty and dark now except for a few lit torches. He trudged up to the Tower wondering what Ron would say. Strangely, he couldn't read any emotion from Ginny, just feel her presence coming from Gryffindor Tower.

Great, he thought, Now that it's happened, she's probably pissed at me for breaking my promise not to enter the bloody tournament, even if it wasn't my fault.

"Balderdash," he said to the Fat Lady as he reached the portrait.

He was nearly blasted off his feet by the level of noise that came through the portrait. Then he was literally hauled through the Portrait Hole by Fred and George.

He was stunned to see that the entire house was in the common room, applauding and cheering him. He was surprised to see red and gold banners decorating the room and a table in the middle groaning with food and drinks.

Several people were now crowding around him, demanding to know how he got passed the age line. Harry repeatedly denied having entered though they refused to listen.

Finally, there was a loud bang and the room became silent.

"All right, you lot!" Ginny's voice rang through the common room, "Leave my boyfriend alone! He's thankful for your support of him but it's been a tiring day for him and he needs to rest." With that, Ginny hauled Harry away from their fellow Gryffindors, now silent and wide-eyed, with the help of Hermione and Rose.

The room remained silent for a few second more then whispering and muttering broke out as the rest of the inhabitants of Gryffindor Tower began talking about Ginny's revelation of her relationship with Harry.

Harry allowed Ginny and the others to sit him down at their favorite spot in front of the fireplace.

"Are you all right?" Ginny asked him.

He was a bit surprised that she had asked the question out loud instead of mentally but decided that she probably wanted him to answer verbally so as to reassure Hermione and Rose.

Harry shrugged and said, "I guess I'll be fine. Even knowing beforehand it would happen didn't quite prepare me for the shock." He then looked at Ginny.

"Are you mad at me, Gin? I know I promised you I wouldn't enter, but..."

He didn't finish his apology since Ginny had started kissing him, to prove she wasn't upset or mad. At the same time, she was talking to him mentally.

"It's not your fault, Harry. Just be careful with whatever tasks they have planned. I want you in one piece at our wedding."

"Oi, I thought I told you none of that in my line of sight," a familiar voice broke into their thoughts.

Harry drew back from Ginny and saw Ron coming up to them, accompanied by Neville and Ti.

Ron looked a bit sheepishly at Harry, running his hand through his hair, "Er, for a while there, I thought you had entered the tournament without telling me. Ginny set me straight, told me you couldn't have done that without her knowing and you'd promised her you wouldn't."

"I know that, Ron," Harry said, "I saw her tell you that, sort of."

Ron shook his head, "That's one thing I probably won't get used to, how the two of you know what the other is doing most of the time." He clapped Harry on the shoulder, "Well, anyway, mate, how does it feel to be the Hogwarts champion?"

Harry thought about it for a moment then grinned, "Honestly? It feels weird. Weird and great. Now, this will be something I can do for myself and be deserving of whatever honor I get."

His sister and closest friends exchanged looks and knew what Harry was talking about. Unlike his scar and fame for having defeated Voldemort as a baby, winning the Tri-Wizard Tournament would be an achievement he could accomplish on his own talents and magic, without the Prophecy.

Harry yawned, "It's getting late, guys and I'm whacked. I'm going to bed." He kissed Ginny good night and headed up to the fourth year boys' dorm. He quickly brushed his teeth and changed to his pajamas. As he climbed into bed, his thoughts turned back to the tournament and the first task.

I wonder what it'll be. I hope it isn't something like dueling some people. I hope Mum and Dad take it easy on me when they hear. Anyway, it isn't my fault. I wonder how the other houses will react.

With that last thought, he fell asleep; unaware the next day would provide answers to his last two thoughts.

When Harry and Ginny entered the Great Hall for breakfast, they noticed the hostile looks Harry was getting from most of Slytherin and

even some of the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students. The other Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs ignored them.

Harry just shrugged it off as he had expected it. As long as none of the Gryffindors were against him, he could tolerate the lack of support from the other houses. He'd just chalk it up to another grudge against Voldemort if old Snakeface was behind his entry into the tournament.

Near the end of breakfast, an eagle owl familiar to Harry and Rose flew into the Great Hall and landed on the teachers' table, right in front of Dumbledore. In its beak, it held a red letter that started smoking. Dumbledore serenely took the letter from the owl which nipped his finger then flew off. The red letter then exploded and the voice of Lily Potter thundered around the Hall.

"ALBUS PERCIVAL WULFRIC BRIAN DUMBLEDORE! HOW DARE YOU ALLOW MY SON TO TAKE PART IN YOUR BLOODY TOURNAMENT! YOU ASSURED JAMES AND I THAT HE COULD NOT ENTER! HOW COULD YOU? YOU BETTER MAKE SURE HE SURVIVES OR, DESCENDANT OF MERLIN OR NOT, IT WON'T BE VOLDEMORT WHO TAKES YOU DOWN!"

The whole Hall was silent at the end of that tirade. Harry thumped his forehead on the table three times, his cheeks burning with embarrassment over his mother's threatening of the Headmaster.

Bloody hell, why did she have to send him a howler, in front of everyone at that? Now, everyone will think I'm a mamma's boy.

He felt Ginny's hand grasp his own and give it a gentle but firm squeeze, *"But I like mamma's boys, especially raven-haired ones with glasses and a lightning bolt scar on their foreheads."*

He also felt a small hand on his shoulder, where Rose was sitting, giving him a gentle squeeze.

"Don't worry, bro," Rose said, "It's just Mum's way of worrying over you. She just wants to put the fear of Merlin on Professor Dumbledore, not that it didn't seem to bother him."

Harry raised his head to glance at Dumbledore. Sure enough, the elderly wizard didn't seem bothered by the howler from Lily, smiling with his characteristic twinkle-in-the-eye as he gazed back at Harry.

Just then, the same eagle owl that had delivered the howler to Dumbledore landed in front of Harry, a letter attached to his leg.

"Hello, Artemis," Rose said, stroking the owl's beak before untying the letter and handing that to Harry.

Harry unfolded the letter and recognized the untidy scrawl of his father as he read it.

Dear Harry and Rose,

I've received word from Albus concerning the recent event at Hogwarts. I have to say that I'm a bit disappointed to learn what has happened but I don't blame you Harry. Ordinarily, I would go along with Albus on any of his plans but, because it involves you, Harry, and puts you in serious danger, I have reservations about it. Unfortunately, there is nothing we can do now but play it by ear. If you need any help, Harry, don't hesitate to get in touch with me or your mother. I know it isn't exactly against the rules but you need every advantage you can get. If indeed this is part of some plan of Voldemort, then we cannot afford to take anything for granted. I'm glad Moody is there. He was one of my greatest instructors at the Auror Academy. He won't be too bothered to follow the rules, so he can help you. That said, let me just say that I'm proud of you, Harry, for being a champion of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, no matter what the circumstances of your entering were. Good luck and do your best. That's what a Potter does well.

Love,

Dad

P.S. I know your mum sent Albus a nasty howler. Don't mind her. She just reacted badly to the news. It's so bad that I'm sleeping on the living room couch for the next month.

“Oh, that’s so bad,” Rose said, having read the letter over Harry’s shoulder, “Poor Dad, that couch can get pretty uncomfortable after a few nights.”

Harry couldn’t help but have a bit of sympathy for his dad, who was getting partial blame for his son’s entry into the Tri-Wizard Cup. He was also heartened by his show of support. He hoped he wouldn’t disappoint him. Like any other boy, he felt the need for approval from his father.

“Well, maybe Mum will relent after she’s thought about it for a while,” Harry said, “After all, it really isn’t his fault.”

The Potter siblings looked at each other as they remembered several times when their father had been forced to sleep in the living room due to some transgression Lily had thought he had done.

“Well, maybe not,” Harry and Rose said together, before laughing. Ginny joined them in their laughter, having seen Harry’s memories of James’ previous escapades and read the letter through her bond with Harry.

Since it was a Sunday, Harry decided to spend the day relaxing and forgetting that in 23 days, he would have to face the first task. He generally succeeded, with Ginny’s help, of course.

Chapter 46: The First Task

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

Harry hated publicity, hated it all his life. Even more, he hated reporters. For as long as he remembered he had been hounded by reporters everywhere he went, reporters interested in the doings of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry had been in Potions when Colin Creevey had informed Professor Snape that Harry was wanted by Ludo Bagman for a publicity shoot, together with a testing of the champions' wands. Harry was led by the younger boy to the room beside the Great Hall where he and the other champions had first gathered. Much to his disgust, Harry found out that a certain reporter he really hated was in the room now.

This particular reporter was a witch, who was presently dressed in magenta robes. She had blonde hair that was set in an elaborate coiffure and a heavily-jawed face upon which a set of bejeweled spectacles was set. Her hands had thick fingers with two-inch long nails that were painted scarlet. Her name was Rita Skeeter.

Harry really hated her. As far back as he could remember, she had written a lot of articles about him for the *Daily Prophet*, many uncomplimentary to him, much to his parents' anger. Fortunately, James had somehow managed to convince the Prophet's management to give her an overseas assignment five years ago. But now, it seemed she was back in England and very eager to write about Harry again.

Now, according to Ludo Bagman, Skeeter was at Hogwarts, assigned to write a publicity article about the Triwizard Tournament in the *Daily Prophet* for the Ministry. She also had a photographer with her.

As Skeeter looked at Harry like Christmas had come early, Harry would have much preferred being in class with Snape than here with HER.

Bloody hell! Harry thought, this woman is going to write another one of her nasty articles.

Just as Rita was asking Bagman to let her interview Harry, Dumbledore walked into the room, followed by Madame Maxime, Professor Propanov and Mr. Crouch. After them came an old wizard with large pale eyes. Harry was surprised to recognize Mr. Ollivander, who owned the Wand shop in Diagon Alley.

“Ah, Rita,” Dumbledore said, a benign smile on his face, “How good it is to see a former student who doesn’t seem to care who her articles scandalize.”

Rita sniffed and said, “I only write them as I see them, Dumbledore.”

“Oh, yes,” Dumbledore said, “no doubt with a Quick-Quotes Quill. Be that as it may, we must start the Weighing of the Wands.” With that he turned from her and looked at the three champions. Harry, Fleur and Krum were now seated side by side in front of a long table where the other three adults had taken seats.

Dumbledore introduced Mr. Ollivander, who then began checking the champions’ wands, starting with Fleur’s. After his examination ended in a successful conjuration of some lovely orchids, he examined Krum’s wand. Finally, he asked for Harry’s.

“Ah, yes,” Mr. Ollivander said, running his hand over the wand, “I remember your wand, Mr. Potter. Eleven inches, made of holly, with a phoenix feather at its core.”

Harry also remembered when he had gotten his wand. It had been the Saturday after his eleventh birthday, when he had gone with his parents and sister to get his school supplies in Diagon Alley.

While his father had gone to Florentine Florescue’s Ice Cream Parlor with Rose, Lily had gone with him to Ollivander’s to get his wand. Harry remembered his mother’s face going pale when Mr. Ollivander had told him that his wand was brother to the one that had given him his scar, since the same phoenix gave a feather for the core of each wand.

Harry often had wondered what that meant. It was even more important now, when it looked like he and Voldemort would eventually have to duel each other.

After Ollivander had checked his wand, Harry and the other champions sat while numerous pictures were taken. Through it all, Harry distracted himself talking with Ginny. As soon as the photographer told them that he was done, Skeeter latched on to Harry's arm.

"Now, how about that interview, Harry?" she said, her smile showing off her gold teeth, "After all, the readers need to know all about the champions."

Harry was about to give an angry retort when Dumbledore again came to his rescue.

"Ah, Harry," Dumbledore said, "There something we must discuss about the Triwizard tournament, some little details. So, if you'll excuse us, Rita." With that Dumbledore took hold of Harry's arm and steered him away from the reporter who looked very annoyed.

Harry and Dumbledore didn't speak as they walked out of the deserted Great Hall, into the Entrance Hall and up the main staircase. There was still a half-hour before dinner. Harry let Dumbledore lead him to the Portrait guarding Gryffindor Tower.

Before leaving him at the Portrait, Dumbledore said, "I decided you needed time to relax after that ordeal, Harry. I know how tiring it is to sit for a photograph." A twinkle appeared in his eye as he added, "They're a real pain, aren't they? Thank Merlin I haven't had to do that in over fifty years. The one consolation for someone my age is that I don't look good in a publicity picture anymore. Get some rest, Harry. I know someone will be coming soon to help you do that."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, smiling, "Thanks for the rescue."

He said the password to the Fat Lady and entered the empty common room. He moved to his usual chair before the cold fireplace. As soon as he had flopped down into it, he felt the tension from being

with Rita and the shoot itself bled out of him. Slowly, his eyelids drooped and he fell asleep.

The next thing he knew, he was being awakened by soft lips pressing against his. He opened his eyes and saw a cascade of red filling his vision. He pulled back a little and gazed at Ginny, who was smiling.

“How are you doing, love?” she asked softly, “Did you get a good rest?”

“Yes,” he answered, a smile forming on his face, “It’s a bit uncanny how Professor Dumbledore sometimes knows what you need, especially after that.”

Ginny frowned for a moment, “Well, I’m glad that’s over. I could feel your tension and anger at that woman. I can’t believe the Headmaster let her into Hogwarts. He knows how horrible her articles were for you over the years.”

Harry shrugged, “Maybe the editor at the Prophet or Bagman didn’t tell him who was coming to do the article. Anyway, I’m hungry after that nap. I didn’t miss dinner, did I?”

Ginny giggled, “No, Harry. I just got back from class. We can just make it to the table before Ron finishes all the food.”

Harry chuckled and allowed Ginny to pull him off the armchair and out the Common Room.

As the days passed, Harry found the rest of Hogwarts slowly coming to terms with him as their champion. He got less furtive looks and fewer people were whispering behind his back.

Of course, the Slytherins were still throwing glares at him, except, strangely enough, for Draco, who always had a neutral look on his face whenever he and Harry faced each other.

Snape, on the other hand, often threw insulting comments at Harry centered on his entry into the tournament while Harry hunched over his cauldron. If it wasn’t for Ginny sending calming thoughts through their bond, Harry would have hexed the git.

A week before the first task, Harry was in Care of Magical Creatures, taking care of the Blast-ended Skrewt they were assigned to raise when Hagrid came up to him.

Hagrid leaned down, looking at the Skrewt as he whispered to Harry, “arry, about the first task, I sugges’ yeh meet me ‘ere tonight. Oh, an’ bring yer Dad’s cloak.” Hagrid straightened up and said, “That’s good, ‘arry. It seems teh be growin’ well.” He then strode off without a backward glance, leaving a puzzled Harry.

Later that evening, as they were sitting down for dinner, Ron took a seat beside Harry.

“Harry,” Ron whispered, “I just saw Charlie, coming in at the Entrance Hall.”

Harry turned to him, puzzled, “Charlie’s here? What could he be doing here?”

“Harry,” Ginny said in his mind, “Remember what Charlie said as we were saying goodbye at the Platform? He said he may see us soon, way before Christmas.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, “You think this has something to do with the Triwizard, Gin?”

“I think so, Harry,” Ginny said, “I doubt he’s here for a social visit, especially considering how hard it is for him to get time off his work. I think he’s already used up any vacation time he had during the summer visiting for our birthdays and the World Cup.”

“His work!” Harry said in his mind, *“Ginny, what if he’s here because of his work?”*

“You don’t think....?” Ginny asked him, *“No, they’d be crazy to do that.”*

“Crazy or brilliant,” Harry said, “Now I have a feeling what Hagrid wants to show me.”

Sure enough, later that night, Harry found himself staring at three huge male dragons of different species as he huddled under his invisibility cloak. More than twenty wizards, including Charlie were busy tying them down within some form of enclosure at the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Harry could feel Ginny's horror and fear as she watched the scene through him. Not even the presence of Madame Maxime, who seemed to be on some sort of date with Hagrid, judging from the flowers he had given her, could tear Harry from watching the dragons as they struggled against the keepers.

When he got back to the Common Room, Harry found it empty except for the New Marauders. He knew that Ginny had told them what he had seen. They now looked at him with looks that showed the same dread and fear he felt.

Harry flopped down in his favorite armchair and placed his head in his hands.

Merlin, how am I going to handle a full-grown dragon? What are they going to make us do?

The Chinese Fireball, Welsh Green and Hungarian Horntail all looked formidable, especially the Horntail.

Ginny moved herself into his lap and wrapped her arms around him, causing his tension to ease.

"Harry?" Hermione asked, "Is it really true? They have dragons here at Hogwarts?"

Harry sighed, "Yes, Hermione, three of them, one for each of us."

Neville let out a low whistle, "Blimey. What are they on about? How can they think you can face a dragon?"

"Well," Hermione said, "Maybe they don't have to fight them as such. Maybe they're just an obstacle you have to get past. After all, you'd have to be a professional like Charlie to really handle a dragon."

Harry thought about it for a moment, "Maybe you're right, Hermione. Maybe all I have to do is get past it. So, if that's true, how do I do that?"

No one had the answer to that question. Hermione and Rose volunteered to research on that. Harry hoped he could get an answer from Dumbledore but doubted it due to the contest's rules. Of course, that should have prevented Hagrid from showing him the dragons in the first place.

Therefore, it was surprising when, on Sunday night with the day of the First Task only three days away, Moody asked him to speak to him after dinner. When he got to the Defense Classroom, he found the ex-Auror removing his wooden leg.

"Ah, Potter," the man said gruffly, "Come in. I just wanted to commend you on your spellwork lately. Close the door." As soon as Harry had closed the door, Moody cast a silencing charm and an imperturbable charm on the door and room.

"I also wanted to ask how you intend to get past your dragon. Yes, I know you know. Never mind that. It's sort of a tradition to cheat at the tournament."

Harry started getting nervous as Moody's magical eye gazed at him. "Well, sir, I haven't come up with anything yet. I've gone over a lot of spells. But, as you know, most spells just bounce off its hide."

"Yes, Potter," he said, "I know that. I have one piece of advice. I hear you're a pretty good flyer. I suggest you use that skill."

"How do I do that, sir?" Harry asked, "Mr. Crouch mentioned that we'd only have our wands for the first task. We won't be allowed to have our brooms."

"Ah, that's the rub, Potter. You're only allowed to bring your wand with you to the task. What you do with it is another matter." He then lifted the charms, "Now, go on with you. Think about what I said."

Harry went up to Gryffindor Tower wondering about that.

“Harry,” Ginny’s voice broke into his mind, “Do you remember one of the spells Remus taught us this summer, the one we had a little trouble concentrating on?”

Harry’s eyebrows drew together as he struggled to remember. Then his eyes widened as he remembered the spell Ginny was hinting at. One of the spells Remus had taught them just before the World Cup was the basic summoning charm, with pillows as objects for the spell.

“Of course! I can summon my broom!”

Of course, they’d only managed to move the pillows a maximum of twenty feet when they were practicing in Potter Manor.

“Ginny, go and get my invisibility cloak and the Map from my trunk and meet me outside the Portrait.”

“What for, Harry? Isn’t it late to wander around looking for an empty broom closet?”

Harry could feel the teasing tone in her mental voice.

“Oh, you naughty girl! We’ll have to do that another time. But right now, I’ll need your help practicing the charm.”

For the next two nights, Ginny helped Harry practice the summoning charm in an empty classroom until midnight. By Monday night, anything he summoned to him moved immediately and quickly, no matter how far. He even managed to summon a book from the other end of the corridor on their way back to Gryffindor Tower.

Then, it was the morning of the first task. Harry woke up before dawn feeling tense and frightened, more than during any Quidditch match he had played in for the past three years. He reached out to Ginny’s mind and discovered that she was still asleep.

Knowing he wouldn’t get any more sleep, he changed quickly and went down to the common room. He sat down in his favorite chair by the fire and looked deep into the embers of the dying fire.

Then, feeling a bit of anxiety, he stroked the fire back to life. When it was nice and warm again, he went back up to his room and grabbed a pouch from inside his trunk. When he reached the fire, he took some powder from the pouch and threw it in the fire which turned the familiar green. He poked his face into the green flames then said "Potter Manor living room".

He looked around the familiar room, which was starting to lighten up from the rising sun shining through the windows. He saw a lumpy shape on one of the couches. It resolved in the light to that of a sleeping man covered in a woolen blanket.

"Dad," Harry whispered then, after a few seconds, said louder, "DAD!"

James jumped up and spun around, his wand out. Unfortunately, his feet caught in the blanket and he toppled to the floor.

Harry grimaced and then said, "Dad, it's me, Harry, by the fire."

James put on his glasses and peered at the fire, "Harry, what are you doing, making a floo-call this early in the morning?"

"Well," Harry began, not quite knowing how to put his feelings into words, "er, it's the day of the first task. I, I, I just wanted to know if you knew."

James knelt beside the fire and saw the anxious look of his eldest looking back at him.

"I'll be there, son." James said, himself feeling worried now, "I'll be there officially to help guard the school, just in case. Unfortunately, your mum isn't allowed to watch until the third task. She was a bit upset over that, which is another reason I'm sleeping here since I didn't try to get permission to let her come. The other parents aren't being allowed, so we couldn't make an exception for Lily. Now, don't worry about the task. Whatever it is, I'm sure you'll do fine. After all, you know more spells than most fourteen year olds. I'll bet a few of them are unknown to Krum and that Delacour girl. Just make sure you move around a lot."

Harry eyed his father critically, "You know, don't you? You know what we're facing today."

James sighed, "Yes, son. I know all the tasks and all about this tournament. That's why I didn't want you to enter. But now that you're in it, I want you to be careful. Winning isn't important. I don't care if you're last place. Just be careful and come out of this alive. Otherwise, I think your Mum and Ginny will kill you, not to mention me, Barty, Bagman and Albus."

"You can't tell me what we're doing against those dragons, can you?" Harry asked.

James gulped, "You know about the dragons?"

"Yes, Dad," Harry said, "We saw Charlie. There's no other reason for him to be at Hogwarts."

James sighed, "All right, I guess I can tell you a bit. You'll each be facing one dragon. You have to rescue someone from the dragon. Someone will explain the exact nature of the task to the three of you just before the task."

"Rescue someone? From a dragon?" Harry asked, incredulous, "Are they daft? How are you supposed to do that? Who are we going to rescue?"

James gave a wan smile, "I'm afraid the details escape me, son. Just be careful, okay? I have to go change. I'll see you after the task, but be aware that I'll be there watching you."

"Okay, Dad," Harry said, "I guess that's all I can ask you. I'll be seeing you." Harry then stepped away from the fire, his mind now wondering who he would be rescuing from a dragon.

A half hour later, he felt Ginny stirring from her sleep.

"Harry, why are you awake already?" Ginny asked in his mind, her voice still a little wooly, *"Are you still worried?"*

"Just a bit, Ginny," he answered her.

“Wait a minute,” Ginny said, “You found out something about the task. It’s causing you a lot of anxiety. What is it?”

Harry sighed and told Ginny about his Dad’s information. Ginny was a bit shocked about it. She then changed and hurried down to Harry. She helped calm him down and come up with a strategy to get past the dragon using his Firebolt.

The first task was to take place after lunch. Harry spent the morning drifting through his classes. During lunch, Harry could only eat with gentle coaxing from Ginny. He was only vaguely aware when Colin told them that Rose had been called by Flitwick to remain after their Charms class.

Finally, McGonagall came by the Gryffindor Table, asking him to follow her. Ginny gave him a fierce hug and a brief kiss on the lips as she wished him luck mentally. The other New Marauders added their own words of encouragement. As he walked through the Great Hall, more words of support came from the other tables. To Harry’s surprise, even Draco gave him a nod, ignoring the glares the other Slytherins were giving the Hogwarts champion.

Harry plodded along behind McGonagall as they walked down the grounds to the area at the edge of the forest where Hagrid had shown him the dragons. To his surprise, he saw that a tent had been erected about fifty feet in front of the enclosure. McGonagall led him inside the tent where Bagman was already talking to Krum and Fleur Delacour. They were both sitting down and looking as nervous as he felt.

“Ah, good, Mr. Potter,” Bagman said, “the third of our champions. Good. Now, about your task, in this bag,” he showed them a purple silk sack, “are models of what you will face. Please pull one out.” He offered the bag to Fleur, “Ladies, first.”

Fleur placed her hand in the bag and pulled out a model of the Welsh Green, with a number ‘one’ attached to it. Fleur’s hand trembled as she held it.

“Ah,” Bagman said, “the first one. Mr. Krum, you next.” He held the bag in front of Krum, who pulled out the model of the Chinese Fireball with a number ‘two’ around its neck.

“Hmm,” Bagman said, “Well, that leaves you, Mr. Potter, with the last one.”

Harry pulled out the model of the Hungarian Horntail, with a number ‘three’ around its neck. He gulped as the model moved on his hand and twitched its nasty looking tail.

“Right,” Bagman said, “The task is a version of one of those muggle fairy tales with the dragon and the princess. Each of the dragons you will face will be guarding someone you care about, some relative who has ‘volunteered’ to play the part of the princess.”

He grinned at the alarmed look on each of the champions’ faces. “Now, don’t worry. There’s a shield and repelling charms around each, er, victim who will be tied to a pole. None of the dragons will be able to get within twenty feet of the ‘princess’. The shield will even repel its breath. What you must do is get past your dragon and up to your ‘princess’. You’ll be safe while you’re beside her. But you have to get her away from the dragon and back the way you came. The moment you and your ‘princess’ get past the dragon again, the handlers will take charge and subdue the beast.”

The tent was silent as the three champions assimilated the information Bagman had given them. Harry wondered again who his ‘princess’ would be. He knew it wasn’t Ginny. He had a sinking feeling who it would be and Ginny seemed to agree with him.

Outside, they could hear the noise of hundreds and hundreds of feet walking past the tent as the rest of the students headed for whatever area they would be viewing the task from, all the while talking, laughing and joking. Through Ginny’s eyes, Harry could see them climbing up a set of stairs into wooden stands that had been erected around the enclosure.

After a few seconds, Bagman said, “Now, the number around the neck of each model refers to the order in which you are to take on the dragons. I have to go now as I’ll be commenting. Ms. Delacour, you

will be first. Just go out into the enclosure when you hear the whistle, all right? Good.” With that, he left the tent.

Another couple of seconds passed then they heard a whistle. Fleur gulped and slowly stepped out of the tent, her hand tightly grasping her wand. A few more seconds and there was a great roar from the crowd, signaling that Fleur had entered the enclosure and was now facing a real Welsh Green.

Harry sat down heavily in a stool as he started to see what was happening through Ginny’s eyes. While doing so, he tuned out Bagman’s commentary.

Ginny was seated high in the stands, almost in the exact middle. Below her, there was a pole stuck into the ground and a small figure probably a little girl, was tied to the pole. Fleur was at the opposite end of the enclosure, coming in through a gap in the fence. Between the tied-up girl and Fleur was the Welsh Green, sitting on its haunches and facing the Beauxbatons champion.

Fleur seemed to spend an inordinate time staring at the figure tied to the pole. She then started moving at a run, first toward the dragon, then weaving to its right.

All the while, the dragon watched her. Suddenly, it opened its mouth and spewed a jet of fire at her. Fleur barely managed to jump aside, avoiding the flames, then rolled to stand up again.

She cast a spell and a red light hit the dragon. The dragon roared a bit and started shaking its head. Then, its head started to droop. Fleur seemed to cast the same spell again. The dragon’s head seemed to hold still, as if it was just staring straight ahead.

Fleur then started to wave her wand in some sort of complicated pattern. The dragon just stood there watching the wand movements. Finally, its head hit the ground, followed by its body. It seemed it was asleep.

Fleur moved cautiously past the beast and up to the pole. She cast a spell to untie the ropes then carefully hugged the little girl. Slowly, the two walked past the sleeping dragon.

Suddenly, the dragon gave a snort and another burst of flame erupted from its nostrils and hit the edge of Fleur's robes. The crowd gasped as one, but Fleur cast a spell that sent a jet of water onto the flames, putting them out. She and the little girl then ran up to the gap in the fence. Once they had reached it, about a dozen wizards moved forward and attached chains to the sleeping dragon. They then levitated it out to a cage set at the side of the enclosure.

Harry closed his eyes and put up the mental wall he habitually used to prevent seeing things through his soulmate's eyes. He didn't want to see anymore. He just listened to Bagman's commentary as the scores of Fleur were tallied by the judges.

After a few minutes, the whistle again sounded and Krum slowly walked out. Harry kept his eyes tightly shut as he concentrated on remembering his plan to get past the dragon. All the while, he could hear Bagman's comments on Viktor's efforts.

Harry's heart began to pump faster and he felt the fear tingling down to his fingertips. He nearly jumped up from the stool when he heard the Chinese Fireball emit a horrible shriek.

Finally, Harry heard Bagman announce that Krum had gotten his 'princess' past the dragon.

Then he heard the whistle. Taking a deep breath and painfully aware of his hammering heart, Harry walked out of the tent and up to the gap in the enclosure's fence.

As he stepped into the enclosure, Harry looked up to the stands, filled to capacity with the students. The faculty, Bagman, Propanov, Madame Maxime and Mr. Crouch all sat together in the middle. Ginny and the rest of the Gryffindors were near them, on Harry's right.

Harry turned his gaze to the floor of the enclosure. His heart sank as he saw the small figure tied to the pole, just beyond the imposing blackish bulk of the Hungarian Horntail. It was Rose.

She was dressed in a light blue shirt and blue denim pants. She also appeared to be asleep. Harry could barely see the silver shimmer of the domelike shield around her.

The Horntail flicked its tail, this way and that as it eyed Harry with its yellowish eyes.

Harry yelled, "*Accio Firebolt!*"

He waited for what seemed like ages before the familiar sight of his broom came through the gap in the enclosure and stopped beside him. Mounting quickly, Harry kicked off from the ground and felt the fear leave him as he soared upward.

"Go, Harry! Go save Rose!" he heard Ginny tell him in his mind.

Harry flew directly at the Horntail, drawing gasps from the crowd. Then he suddenly banked hard to the right, just as the dragon unleashed a jet of flame which barely missed him. Harry climbed upward and circled above the dragon.

The dragon roared and followed his movements with its yellow, beady eyes, furling and unfurling its wings as it stood about thirty feet in front of Rose.

Harry started to rise higher slowly, inch by inch, enticing the dragon to follow him. Finally, the dragon extended its wings fully and pushed off the ground. Harry immediately dove and slipped right below the beast, avoiding its jaws by mere inches.

He felt himself pass through the shield and landed right beside Rose. She still seemed to be asleep. There also seemed to be a golden locket shaped like a seashell on a gold necklace around her neck. Harry decided to leave this for later.

"Rose," Harry said as he came up to her, "Come on, sis. Wake up." Harry pointed his wand at her, "*Enervate!*"

Rose woke up with a start and looked around, confusion evident on her face. She calmed down a little when she saw him.

"Harry, where am I? What happened? Why am I tied up to a pole?"

"Just relax, Rose," Harry said, "It seems our dear Headmaster and the organizers of this tournament thought it interesting to have a

version of the prince, the dragon and the princess. It seems you're the princess I'm rescuing."

"What!" Rose said, her face showing outrage, "What dolts thought that up? Come on. Get me out of these ropes." She started struggling against her bonds.

"Take it easy," Harry said, "Just give me a few seconds to get this right. *Diffindo!*"

Harry used a well-placed cutting curse to sever Rose's ropes.

"*Harry! Watch out for the dragon!*" Ginny suddenly screamed in his mind.

Harry whirled around to see that the Horntail had landed just a few feet from them, closer than it should be able to. It raised its clawed arms and took a swipe at them. Harry grabbed Rose and dropped to the ground.

The dragon's arm hit the shield. The shield collapsed in a shower of sparks and the dragon's hand passed through the air just above their heads. Its claws barely struck the pole, leaving a groove of claw marks a half inch deep on the wood.

Harry grabbed Rose and they mounted the Firebolt, Rose wrapping her arms around Harry's waist. Harry kicked off the ground just as the dragon took another swipe at them. This time, it connected with the pole, tearing it out of the ground.

Harry made the broom climb upward, zooming above the stands.

"Hang on, Rose," Harry yelled to his sister. Rose tightened her hold around Harry's waist.

Harry flew out over the Forest. Looking back, he saw that the dragon was following them, its wings occasionally flapping to give it bursts of speed.

After about few minutes, Harry heard Ginny's voice in his mind, *"Harry! Don't go too far over the forest. Head back to the enclosure. The handlers are gathering to decide what to do."*

"Okay, Gin."

Harry made a wide turn and headed back toward the enclosure. The dragon made a tighter turn and closed the distance to them to only twenty feet.

Harry suddenly banked right, just in time as a stream of fire passed by them. Harry dove down into the trees. Once they were among the trees, Harry slowed down. He weaved in and out of the trees, trying to head for Hogwarts. Harry stopped a moment and used his wand, *"Point me!"* He knew that Hogwarts lay west of the Forest.

Finally, they saw the stands and Harry guided the broom over the stands. Cheers erupted as the crowd saw them. The cheers turned to screams and gasps as a shadow fell over him and Rose. Harry leaned forward and pushed the broom forward to move faster.

Then he heard the dragon roar.

"Harry!" Rose said, "Someone firing spells at the dragon from the stands."

Harry turned around and saw that the dragon had stopped and turned around to face the stands.

Harry's heart clenched when he saw Ti standing at the top of the stands, his wand out and pointed at the dragon. Behind Harry, Rose gasped.

The dragon hovered for a moment then flapped its wings once and dove toward Harry's friend.

"Harry! Do something," Ginny's voice bordered into panic.

Harry guided the broom to dive back towards the dragon. He aimed his wand and concentrated, *"Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!"* he cried in rapid succession.

The red jets of light struck the dragon's back hard, one after another. The dragon slowed and shuddered. It started to lose altitude slowly. Then, several of the handlers came up and cast their own stunners at it. It finally landed on the ground with a loud thud and lay still.

Harry guided his broom back to the entrance of the enclosure. Professors McGonagall, Moody and Hagrid met them there. They helped Harry and Rose dismount from the

Firebolt.

Harry wrapped his arms around Rose, who he noted was starting to tremble.

"Shh," Harry said as he embraced his sister, "It's all over, Rose. The dragon's been subdued. It's all right. You're all right. I'm all right." He felt her stop trembling.

"How is she, Potter?" McGonagall asked.

"I think she'll be fine, Professor," Harry said, "She just needs a few minutes to collect herself."

"That's good," McGonagall said then she frowned, "What were they thinking, putting her in danger like that. I can't believe the Horntail got up so close to the two of you and the shield collapsed so fast."

"She's right, 'arry," Hagrid said, "Krum's dragon couldn't get within ten feet of 'im and 'is mother."

Harry frowned, "Is that so, Hagrid? That's very suspicious."

"I should say so," Moody said gruffly, "There should have been no way for any of that to happen. Even the stands had repelling charms around them to keep the dragons away from the crowd."

Harry's frown deepened. It was becoming obvious that someone had tampered with either the shield or the dragon.

"Come on, Potter," McGonagall said, a bit gentler than usual, "We should have had Madame Pomfrey look at you and your sister. Then I

have to go deal with Mr. Malfoy, I mean, Mr. Black. What was that boy thinking, trying to cast spells at a dragon?"

"Don't be too harsh on him, Professor," Rose said, unexpectedly, "He may have saved our lives. He distracted the dragon just when it was closing in on us."

"Well, he should have left it to the handlers," McGonagall said gruffly, "Still, I see your point, Miss Potter. I will take it into consideration when I talk with Mr. Black."

McGonagall and Hagrid led them into the first-aid tent, which was now divided into several cubicles that were separated with curtains. Harry could see Fleur sitting down on a stool in one of the cubicles with the young girl beside her.

Madame Pomfrey ushered Harry and Rose into one of the cubicles and fussed over them as she ranted about the dragons. Just as Madame Pomfrey finished her examination, the curtains were thrust aside and James Potter peered into the room. Seeing his children inside, he rushed in and drew them both into a hug.

After a few seconds, he looked at Madame Pomfrey, "How are they, Poppy?"

"They're fine, James," Madame Pomfrey said, "Nothing a good Dreamless Sleep Potion can't cure. They probably should take one tonight. Really! Dragons! Tying a child to a pole! What were they thinking?" Shaking her head, the school nurse let James lead his children out of the cubicle, one arm around each.

Just as they were exiting the tent, Ginny came running up to them. She grabbed hold of both Harry and Rose and gave them very tight hugs, reminiscent of her mother's.

"Hey, love," Harry said, hugging her back, "It's all right. We're both fine."

"Yes, Ginny," Rose said, patting her friend on the back, "We're not hurt, just tired."

Ginny didn't answer, only tightening her arms around both of them, paying no attention at all to James.

James smiled, "Well, I see you two are in good hands. I'll just check on those dragons. I'll see you guys before I go home. I dread to face your mother after this. I bet she'll send another howler to Dumbledore, and maybe one to Crouch and Bagman." He shuddered, "Ah well, looks like another week on the couch for me, at least." He strode off then.

As soon as James had gone, Ron, Hermione and Neville came up to the three.

"Harry, Rose," Hermione asked, "Are you guys all right?"

"Of course they are, Hermione," Ron said, "You think Madame Pomfrey would let them out of her sight if they weren't?"

Hermione huffed at him, "It's only proper to ask them, Ronald."

"Hey, easy there, Hermione," Neville said, "You can see they look okay. We were all worried about them."

"All right, Neville," Hermione said, "I'm sorry, Ron. I just needed their reassurance."

Ron shrugged, "Well, that's okay, Hermione. Now that we know they're fine, we can tell Harry his scores. You guys took so long in the First-aid tent that they decided to give them without you there."

"So what did I get?" Harry asked.

"Well," Neville said, "The scores are out of ten. They used their wands to show your score. Madame Maxime gave you an eight, Crouch and Dumbledore each gave you a nine and Bagman gave you a ten. However, Propanov gave you a five."

"That scumbag," Ron said darkly, "He said it was because you left the area. He gave Krum a ten and Krum's mother was almost squashed by his dragon as they ran away from it."

“How did that happen?” Harry asked, “I decided not to watch that part after seeing what Fleur went through.”

“He cast a spell right in the dragon’s eye,” Ron explained, “It made the thing go berserk, stomping all over the place. At first, the dragon couldn’t get near the place where Krum’s mother was tied up. But when they tried to get past it, the beast stomped a little too close. Krum fired another spell at the bottom of its feet just as it was about to step on his mum. Anyway, Harry, with your combined scores, you managed to tie for first place with Krum. Isn’t that great?”

Harry grinned, “Yeah, that’s fantastic!”

Then, Bagman came in the tent, “Ah good, you’re up and about, Harry. I just need a word with you and the other champions about the next task, all right. Come on back inside the tent. Oh, bring your ‘princess’ with you.”

Harry almost laughed out loud as he saw the sour look on Rose’s face over Bagman’s referral to her as ‘his princess’.

“All right, guys,” Harry said, “I’ll see you in the common room.” He gave Ginny a kiss on the cheek while mentally asking her to wait for him and Rose. He then followed Bagman back inside the tent, one hand pulling Rose along.

They found Fleur and Krum waiting for them inside, their own ‘princesses’ with them. Harry thought that the young girl with Fleur must be her sister since they bore a striking resemblance to each other. Krum’s mother, on the other hand, looked less blocky and severe than her son.

“Well,” Bagman said, a beaming smile on his face, “Congratulations are in order to all of you for completing the first task. Now, you’ve got a nice, long break before the second task which will take place at half past nine in the morning of February the twenty-fourth. However, if you all notice, the ‘princesses’ each have a locket around their necks. In that locket is a clue to the next task, so you can prepare for them. Opening the locket is a bit tricky, which is part of the fun. All clear? Good. Now, off with you then.”

Harry and Rose exited the tent and found Ginny waiting for them. As they were walking back to the castle, they ran into Rita Skeeter, who was wearing acid-green robes today.

“Oh, how lovely,” Skeeter said, “Congratulations, Harry. How about a quick word? How did you feel facing that dragon to rescue your sister? Did you think the scoring was fair for you?”

Harry glared at Rita. He knew his sister and Ginny were also glaring at her.

“You want a word?” Harry said, “Well, here’s four: No comment and Goodbye!”

He then walked rapidly away, his two favorite redhead girls on his arms.

Chapter 47: McGonagall's announcement

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

James had dinner beside his children in the Great Hall that night. He told Harry that he and the other Aurors were concerned over the ease with which the Horntail had broken through the shield. No one had a clue how that had happened, though Dumbledore had a few theories. Since the shields had been created by Dumbledore, Moody and James together, it seemed impossible to attribute it to a flaw in the shields themselves.

On the other hand, Charlie Weasley and the other dragon handlers were puzzled over its aggressiveness, giving chase to Harry and Rose over the forest far from the enclosure. Ordinarily, it should have been content with chasing them away.

Then, there was the seashell shaped locket that had been around Rose's neck during the task. Harry had tried to open it after the task but failed. There was no visible seam between the two halves of the shell, preventing him from prying it open. He tried a few spells like 'Alohomora' but none of them worked. This baffled even Hermione and Rose.

Harry decided not to dwell on these problems for the moment and simply enjoy having survived. With the second task almost three months away, he preferred to concentrate on his studies, his training with Dumbledore and spending time with Ginny.

He and Rose thanked Ti for his attempt to help them against the dragon. Their thanks included a kiss on the cheek from Rose which caused the younger boy to blush furiously. They found out that McGonagall hadn't been too harsh on Ti, merely docking him fifteen points and a nightly detention with her for three days.

Lily did send Dumbledore another howler the day after the first task. To spare Harry any embarrassment, she decided to send it during afternoon classes. Unfortunately, her voice was so loud, it was audible throughout the main castle, if not understandable.

Harry stayed in the common room during dinner and hid under his invisibility cloak for the rest of the night, with Ginny, of course. The house elves were all too happy to serve the bonded pair a late dinner and Ginny made sure Harry went to bed happier after a nice good snog session in an empty classroom.

A week later, on the way back from Care of Magical Creatures, Harry was at the rear of his fellow Gryffindors, anticipating a nice lunch with Ginny, when he heard someone call out, "Hey, Potter," from behind him. Turning around, he was surprised to see Draco standing there, without his usual cronies behind him.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Harry asked as he eyed the approaching Slytherin suspiciously.

Malfoy scowled, "Look, Potter. This isn't easy for me to say, but I just, um, wanted t-t-to, t-t-thank you for saving Tiberius that day from that dragon."

Harry's eyebrows rose to his hairline. He also felt Ginny's surprise at Draco's statement, "What did you just say? Are you thanking me for saving someone you disowned?"

Malfoy's scowl deepened, "What's the matter, Potter, that dragon's roars damage your hearing?"

Then Draco sighed, something Harry had never seen him do before, "Look, Potter, I admit I wasn't saddened over what my Father did. In fact, I almost considered throwing a party after he disowned that blood traitor. But," he held up a hand to cut Harry's angry retort, "this past summer, I found it lonely at home without him there. I-I guess I missed him. Then, during the dragon thing, when I saw that beast start to head for him, well, I felt fear, fear not for myself but fear for someone who shares the same blood in my veins."

Draco shrugged his shoulders, "Perhaps I do care for the little twit after all. But you better not tell him that. Anyway, thanks for saving his life. Whatever Father says, he's still got the blood of a Malfoy." Without another word, he brushed past Harry and walked back to the castle.

Harry stared after him, wondering what had gotten into his blonde rival.

"Maybe he does care about Ti after all," Ginny said in his mind.

"I don't know, Gin. Still, he does seem to be less hostile lately, even to me." Harry said to her mentally, *"I better keep a better eye on him."*

"We all will, Harry," Ginny said, *"If he is changing for the better, it'll be good for Ti. Now, hurry up and get here. I'm saving you a place and I want to start eating."*

Harry smiled both physically and mentally, *"Yes, dear. Coming, dear."*

Another week passed and the Gryffindors were finishing up their Transfiguration class when McGonagall cleared her throat.

"Class, I have an announcement to make," she said.

Once the class had quieted down, she continued, "Now, the Yule Ball, which is a tradition during the Triwizard Tournament, is fast approaching. The Ball is open to all fourth years and above, but a student in a lower year may attend if invited by one of you."

Harry noted that Lavender Brown, Parvati and Hermione all looked at him and giggled. He guessed they knew who he would invite, since his relationship with Ginny was now well known to most of the students of his House. He also felt Ginny's elation over the news.

McGonagall looked disapprovingly at the three girls for a moment before continuing, "Dress robes will be the attire for the Ball. It will take place on December 25th, from eight o'clock until midnight. You will be allowed to go to Hogsmeade this weekend to attend to any thing you may require for the Ball."

She then stared at the whole class, "The Yule Ball is a way of socializing with our foreign guests. While this is an opportunity to relax and, er, let our hair down, I will expect each and every one of you to be on your best behavior. I will be very displeased if a Gryffindor embarrasses this school. Have I made myself clear?"

The bell rang just then and the class hurriedly gathered their things.

Just as he was leaving, McGonagall asked Harry to remain behind.

“Yes, Professor?” Harry asked.

“Potter,” McGonagall said, “I expect you will be inviting Miss Weasley to the Ball.”

Harry felt his cheeks flush, “Er, yes, Professor. She’d be really mad if I didn’t.”

“You better believe it, Potter,” he heard Ginny say in his mind.

McGonagall gave him a slight smile, “Then, I have to inform you that part of the Yule Ball tradition is that the champions and their partners open the Ball with a dance.”

Harry’s eyes widened, “B-b-but, Professor, I don’t dance.”

McGonagall frowned, “Then you had better learn, Potter. You wouldn’t want to disappoint Miss Weasley now, would you? It’s tradition so you have to do it.”

Harry sighed, “All right, Professor.”

Harry could hear Ginny laughing in his mind as he walked to the Great Hall for lunch. He had never liked to dance. His mum had tried to teach him muggle dancing when he was younger but it had never really interested him. It looks like he’ll have to ask his mum to teach him.

“Oh, your mum will be delighted to know that, Harry,” Ginny said, amusement in her mental voice.

“Be kind, Ginny,” Harry said, a bit annoyed, *“I’m only doing this so I don’t step on your feet while we dance.”*

“Okay, Harry. I’m sorry,” Ginny said, still amused, *“Come and have some lunch, love. There’s treacle tart today.”*

"All right, I forgive you," Harry said, his mind now on his favorite dessert.

The following Saturday was the day for the Hogsmeade trip that McGonagall had announced. Harry and Ginny planned to wander around the village in the morning, meet up with Hermione, Rose, Neville, Ron and the twins at noon for lunch at the Three Broomsticks. Then they would split up to all-boys and all-girls for some late Christmas shopping before meeting again at half past three for the walk back to the castle.

Harry and Ginny met in the common room at seven o'clock in the morning since they wanted to get an early start to Hogsmeade. Ginny was excited since this would be only her second trip to Hogsmeade. They were dressed warmly since it had been snowing for the last two days and the grounds were covered with the white stuff.

When they entered the Great Hall, they found it almost empty. They had a quick breakfast and managed to get past Filch with no trouble.

They walked hand-in-hand down the path through from the school.

As they walked past the Train Station, Harry asked, "So, Ginny, where do you want to go first?"

"Why don't we go first to Honeyduke's Sweetshop," Ginny said verbally before switching to talking in Harry's mind, *"There are a few things I want to get there. Then we can go to Zonko's Joke Shop."*

"Sounds good to me," Harry answered mentally, a smile forming on his face.

They entered the candy shop and were greeted by the shop's owner, Mr. Flume, who was behind the counter.

Harry allowed Ginny to lead him around the store, each of them holding a basket to fill with their favorite sweets.

As Ginny's basket filled up faster than Harry's, Harry struggled to keep his amusement in check. If there was one thing Ginny shared with Ron aside from red hair, freckles, their last name and parents, it

was a sweet tooth. Ginny absolutely adored chocolate and sweets, which used to be Harry's only gift to her on past Christmases and birthdays.

Finally, Ginny's basket was filled to capacity with chocolate frogs, jelly slugs, ice mice, licorice wands, pepper imps, peppermint toads, sugar mice, sugar quills and all sorts of nonmagical chocolate and candies. Harry's basket had less variety but almost as much.

They paid for their choices and went two doors down to Zonko's Joke Shop. There, they replenished their supply of dungbombs, hiccup sweets and other joke items. They were a bit disappointed that there seemed to be nothing new in the store.

"When they graduate, Fred and George are going to make their own Joke shop. They've got ideas that'll blow the competition away," Ginny said to Harry in his mind as they left the store.

"You said it, Ginny," Harry said, *"Those two are great pranksters and their ideas are original. I heard them one time asking Sirius for tips on prank items."*

"Oh? And Sirius gave them some?"

"You bet. They'd probably get him as a consultant for their future store if he wasn't an Auror."

"I doubt that'll stop Sirius from helping them."

"You know, you're probably right." They laughed at that.

"So," Harry said, *"Where do you want to go now, Ginny?"*

The other students were now coming into the village, making the streets a little crowded.

"I think we need a little alone time, Harry," she said to him, a wicked smile forming on her face, *"I know you brought your other cloak. Let's go toward the Shrieking Shack."*

Harry grinned, *"Your wish is my command, Gin."*

They moved into an alley where Harry drew his invisibility cloak from a pocket and threw it over them. Concealed from sight, they moved to the woods near the Shrieking Shack. When they were among the trees with no one in sight, Harry threw off the cloak and spread his normal cloak on the snowy ground.

Ginny pushed him to a sitting position on the cloak and sat on his lap.

“So,” Harry said to her, *“What do you plan for us to do during this alone time?”*

“Oh, something like this,” Ginny answered as she placed her arms around his neck and planted her lips on his. For an indeterminate amount of time, they lost all awareness of their surroundings. Finally, the need for air made them pull apart.

They could feel each other’s heart racing from their passion. They sat there in each other’s arms, the heat from their passion holding the cold at bay. Then, Ginny happened to glance at Harry’s watch.

“Harry! It’s fifteen past twelve! We’re late!”

They quickly brushed themselves off and hurriedly walked to the Three Broomsticks. Upon entering the pub, they looked around. When they spotted their friends, sitting in a booth along the wall, they moved there.

“Hey!” Ron said, “What took you guys so long? We’ve been waiting for hours.”

“Now, Ron,” Hermione said, “That’s not true. It’s not even half past twelve yet. We’d only just got here ourselves.”

Before his two friends could get into a row, Harry said, “Sorry, we took too long at Zonko’s. We’re here now, so let’s order our food and eat. We still have some Christmas shopping to do.”

Neville and Rose quickly agreed and called Madame Rosemerta over to take their orders.

After a nice lunch, Harry went off with Ron and Neville while Ginny went with Rose and Hermione.

As they walked down the street, Neville turned to Harry, "So, Harry, do you have any idea what to get Ginny?"

Harry nodded, "I think I do, Nev, but I can't tell you or even think of it. I want it to be a surprise."

"Oh, right," Neville said, "She might find out about it because of that thing you share."

"Still, Harry," Ron said, "It must be nice to be able to talk to each other even when you aren't with each other."

"Yes, Ron," Harry said, smiling, "It's like we're never really apart from each other. We really are half of a whole."

They soon reached a shop that had only opened the previous year which specialized in jewelry and little knick knacks, both magical and nonmagical that could be given as gifts. It was called "The Little Menagerie" and was the shop where Harry had bought Ginny's previous Christmas gift.

The boys found many gifts in the shop including Harry's gift to Ginny. They moved on to the other stores.

They met up with the girls on time for the walk back to the castle together. They talked and joked as they trudged through the snow. All in all, it had been an enjoyable and fruitful day.

The week that followed was filled with last minute assignments and surprise tests. Before they knew it, it was the last day of the term.

Harry and Ginny were entering the Gryffindor common room after an after-dinner walk around the grounds when they noticed Ron sitting in an armchair in front of the fireplace, his face pale. Hermione was sitting beside him, a look of pity on her face. The common room was empty except for a couple of sixth year girls talking in the opposite corner.

“Ron?” Ginny asked, taking a seat on the other side of her brother, “Is something wrong?”

“I shouldn’t have done that,” Ron mumbled.

“Done what?” Harry asked as he sat beside Ginny, “What did you do, Ron?”

“Er, he asked Fleur Delacour to go with him to the Ball,” Hermione said.

Harry and Ginny’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You what?” they blurted out together.

“I don’t know what came over me,” Ron said, “I was just passing by as she was talking to that Diggory bloke when it came over me and I asked her.”

Ron moaned and put his head in his hands, “She didn’t say anything, just looked at me like I was some unsavory thing. And then, I sort of just came to my senses and ran for it.”

“That’s too bad, Ron,” Harry said, “Maybe she was trying to charm Diggory with her Veela charm and you felt it. I found out from Dumbledore that she is part Veela since her grandmother was one. Never mind. I’m sure you’ll find someone else to take to the Ball.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, dully, “I guess you and Ginny are going together, right?”

“Of course, Ron,” Ginny said, raising one eyebrow, “We are boyfriend and girlfriend, after all.”

“Well, that makes me the only one without a date,” Ron said, “Neville asked Lavender and Seamus and Dean asked Parvati and her sister in Ravenclaw, Padma.” He then looked at Hermione, “Hey, Hermione, you’re a girl.”

“Oh, well spotted, Ron,” Hermione said, acidly, “I would have thought you’d take longer to guess that.”

“Ha, ha,” Ron said, “Very funny. Anyway, how about coming to the Ball with me?”

“I’m sorry, Ron,” Hermione said, blushing, “but someone’s already asked me and I said yes.”

“Oh, come on,” Ron said, “You can’t be serious.”

“Yes, Ronald,” Hermione said, angrily, “If you haven’t noticed I’m a girl all these years, it doesn’t mean someone else hasn’t noticed.” With that, she stomped off toward the girls’ dormitories.

Ron stared after her, “Someone really asked her to the Ball?”

“Yes, Ron,” Ginny said, “someone did.”

”Who is it, Ginny?” Ron asked, “You know who it is. Come on, tell me.”

”No, Ron,” Ginny said, “It’s not my place to tell.”

Ron then slumped dejectedly down into the chair he was sitting in.

With Ron distracted, Harry pulled Ginny over onto his lap. Ginny snuggled up to him and placed her head on his chest. Harry placed his chin over her head and they wrapped their arms around each other. Ginny sighed contentedly.

Ron glanced at them, a grimace momentarily crossing his face. After a few moments of watching them, he cleared his throat.

“Harry,” Ron said, “can you do me a favor?”

“What kind of favor, Ron?” Harry asked, warily.

“Well,” Ron said, “You’re taking my sister to the ball. I think it’s fair if I take yours. Can you ask Rose for me?”

Harry’s eyes widened, “Are you daft, Ron? You want to take Rose to the Ball? Are you sure?”

"I'm not sure that's a good idea either, Ron," Ginny said, "Is that what you really want?"

Ron shrugged, "I've known her for years, Ginny. You two are alike in many ways. I just figured it wouldn't be so bad to go with her, as friends. It'll be like taking my sister except she isn't my sister. So, Harry, please, can you ask her for me?" He ignored the scowl that formed on Ginny's face.

"No, Ron," Harry said, firmly, "You want to take her to the Yule Ball, you ask her. I'm not going to be your messenger boy, especially with Rose."

Ron deflated again, "Fine. Where is she, anyway?"

"I think she's in the library, writing an essay for Snape," Ginny said, "She told me so at dinner."

"I hope she gets back here soon," Ron said, "I'd like to ask her tonight."

As if on cue, the portrait hole opened up and Rose stepped inside, accompanied by Ti. They seemed to be talking animatedly about something.

Harry and Ginny glanced at each other then at Ron, who was watching Rose and Ti warily.

Rose and Ti then came up to the three, smiles on their faces.

"Hey, guys," they both said.

"What are you all doing down here this late?" Rose asked.

"Er, we were just relaxing," Ron answered quickly, "You know last day of term. No more homework."

Ti yawned, "Okay. I'm going to turn in. Good night, Rose, Harry, Ginny, Ron."

"Good night, Ti," they all said.

Rose yawned and stretched, "Snape's essays are bloody mind twisting. I never thought I could finish it." She flopped down on one of the couches beside them, "I'd go up myself but I need a few minutes to get my mind relaxed enough to sleep." She then closed her eyes.

The three other Gryffindors looked at each other.

Then Harry whispered to Ron, "All right, Ron. If you really want to ask her, now's probably a good time to do it. She's more likely to say 'yes' right now than tomorrow morning."

Ron gulped and cleared his throat a bit noisily, "Um, Rose?"

"Yes, Ron?" Rose asked, her eyes still closed.

"Would you go to ball with me?" Ron said rapidly.

"What was that, Ron?" Rose said, opening her eyes, "Are you eating while talking again?"

Ron took a deep breath, "I said, 'would you like to go to the Yule Ball with me?'"

Rose stared at him for a moment then said, "I don't know, Ron. Is it going to be like a date, because I don't like you like that."

"Please, Rose," Ron begged, "We can go as friends. We've known each other for years. I think we can do this without being uncomfortable with each other. Otherwise, I'll be the only one in my year without a date."

"Oh?" Rose asked, "Who are the others going with?"

"Well," Ron said, "Seamus asked Parvati and her twin Padma from Ravenclaw to go with him and Dean while Neville asked Lavender yesterday to be his date."

Only Ginny saw the momentary look of pain in Rose's eyes when Ron told her about the other fourth year Gryffindors' dates.

Rose looked thoughtful for a moment then shrugged her shoulders, "Er, sure, why not? No one else will probably ask me anyway."

"Great, good," Ron said, "Er, thanks."

"Okay, Ron," Rose said, getting up, "Now, I think I'll go upstairs now. I'm starting to feel sleepy."

"I'll go with you," Ginny said. She gave Harry a kiss on the cheek and he did the same.

The two redhead girls said 'good night' to Ron then went up the stairs to the girls' dormitories.

After a few seconds, Harry said, "Ron, I don't think it's a good idea for you to take Rose to the Ball, just so you can have a date. She'll be really mad if she doesn't enjoy herself."

"Hey, relax, Harry," Ron said, "It'll be okay. As I said, I've known her for years. It'll be fine."

"All right, Ron," Harry said, "I'm just warning you like you did when Ginny and I got together though there's more to it. If she gets hurt, it won't be just me you're going to have mad at you."

"Okay, okay," Ron said, "I understand. I know Ginny will be pissed, too. Don't worry."

Harry hoped that Ron wouldn't regret his words.

Chapter 48: A Christmas Dance

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

The week passed quickly with the students doing nothing but relaxing and waiting for the Christmas Day and the Ball. Harry and the New Marauders spent it playing in the snow and admiring the decorations of the castle.

It seemed the staff wanted to impress their visitors since the castle was decked in some of the best décor Harry had ever seen in the castle.

There was a lovely feast on Christmas Eve. At the end of the Feast, the New Marauders did a repeat of the show they did at the previous End-of-Term feast. They added a few more subjects, like Madame Maxime and the dragons.

At the end of the show, another sign appeared on the ceiling,

Merry Christmas to All! From the New Marauders

Enjoy the Yule Ball

The message also appeared in French and Bulgarian. Applause rang around the Great Hall.

Christmas morning dawned early for Harry. For a moment, he felt sad over not being at Potter Manor with his parents and younger siblings, but he was here with Ginny, Rose and the rest of his friends. That was enough for now. At any rate, they were going to Potter Manor on the afternoon of Boxing Day anyway.

Harry's musings were interrupted by Ron pushing aside the curtains of his bed, excitement in his eyes.

"Harry, get up!" Ron said, "It's Christmas!"

Harry laughed, "All right, Ron. I'm awake. Give me a minute."

“Hurry up, will you,” Ron said, “The presents can’t wait for long.” He then bounded out of the room.

Still, chuckling, Harry set off for the bathroom, giving a mental ‘good morning’ to Ginny on his way there.

Later, he came down to the common room to find it full of his housemates. He moved off to the area in front of the fireplace where the other New Marauders were gathered.

They spent half the morning opening presents. Everyone got the traditional Weasley jumper, including Ti, whose jumper was red with gold lettering.

Ginny loved the delicate crystal figure of a leaping tiger that Harry had given her. The gift Ron, Ti and Neville gave her was a nice silver hairclip with tiny figures of cats moving along it. Rose and Hermione gave her a set of scented shampoos.

Harry’s presents included a photo album from Ginny with pictures of the two of them taken since the previous Christmas, including their respective birthdays. He received several fine quills from Hermione and Rose and chocolates from Ron, Ti and Neville.

Ron received mostly various chocolates and candies. Hermione gave him a new book on Quidditch. Harry and Ginny gave him a pair of woolen gloves to go with his new jumper.

Rose got a lovely rose-shaped pendant on a silver chain from Harry and Ginny. Hermione gave her a book on famous seers. Ron, Neville and Ti gave her a dragon shaped jewel hairclip.

Hermione received a new cloak from Ginny and Harry, a set of magical makeup from Rose, a gift certificate from Flourish and Blott’s from Neville and a set of quills from Ti and Ron.

Neville got mostly stuff related to Herbology. Ti got a set of quills from Hermione and Rose, a range of Zonko products from Harry and Ginny and a bunch of chocolate and candies from Neville and Ron.

Breakfast was served by the house elves in the common room as the Great Hall was being prepared for the Ball.

They went outside to walk around the Lake, then returned to the common room for lunch. After lunch, they had a good snowball fight, which involved most of the school. At three o'clock, the girls who were going to the Ball went back to the castle.

"Why do they have to go back now?" Ron asked, "It's still five hours to the Ball."

Harry just shrugged then threw a snowball at Ron's face and ran away laughing.

"Oi!" Ron shouted, "I'll get you for that, Potter!" Ron then started chasing Harry around the grounds.

At six o'clock, the boys from fourth year and above went back into the castle to get ready. The fourth year Gryffindor boys' dorm was a whirlwind of rushing boys and scattered clothes as the occupants dressed in their best.

Harry looked at himself in the full-length mirror of the room. He was dressed in formal robes of bottle green. His mother had said that shade of green brought out the color of his eyes.

"Hmmm. You really look good in that, Harry."

"Ginny! No peeking! We promised each other not to look through the bond whenever we were changing or dressing up."

"Sorry, Harry. I couldn't help it. All right, I'll go for now. See you in a while, love."

Harry shook his head and sighed. He really wanted to see what Ginny looked like but he intended to keep his promise not to look at her while she was dressing. He went back to trying to make his hair lie flat.

Fifteen minutes later, He and Ron were sitting in the common room, waiting for their dates. Ti and Maggie were sitting with them, envy

evident on their faces as they couldn't go to the ball. Seamus and Neville had already left for the Great Hall with their dates while Dean was meeting Padma at the Entrance Hall.

Harry felt Ginny approaching them through their Bond and looked up. His breath caught and he felt his blood rush down between his legs.

Standing at the top of the last flight of stairs to the girls' dormitories was Ginny. She was wearing light pink robes and her hair was arranged to fall like a cascade of fire and curled near the ends as it fell around her shoulders. She was also wearing the necklace he had given her for Christmas the previous year and the charm bracelet he had given her for her last birthday was on her wrist.

Then Rose came down and stood beside her. She was wearing silvery-white robes and her hair was bunched up above her head in a style he had seen his mother wear when she was younger.

Now that the two redheads were side by side, one could see they were growing in different ways. Rose was now taller than Ginny by at least three inches, her face was becoming narrower and her hair was getting darker, much like her mum's. Ginny, on the other hand, had lighter hair and a fuller figure with fuller breasts. Both of them looked really lovely tonight.

Ginny smirked and descended the stairs. She approached her boyfriend and closed his open mouth with one finger. Then, she kissed him. He returned it with passion.

"Hey, can we go now?" Ron asked as he linked his arm with Rose's arm, "I'm starving."

Ginny and Rose rolled their eyes. The four said goodbye to Ti and Maggie and headed out the portrait hole.

Ginny saw a stunned look on Ti's face as he watched them leave Gryffindor Tower. She knew he was only looking at Rose and sighed.

The four friends descended the marble staircase and headed for the Entrance Hall.

When they arrived there, it was packed with students waiting for the oak front doors of the Great Hall to open at eight o'clock. They saw and greeted several of their friends and housemates like Fred who was with Angelina Johnson, George who was with Alicia Spinnet and Oliver Wood who was with a seventh year Ravenclaw they didn't know.

They also saw Seamus with Parvati, Dean with Padma and Neville with Lavender as they worked their way to the doors.

"I wonder where Hermione is," Ron said, looking over the heads of the crowd, "You don't think she skipped out of this, do you?"

"No, Ron," Rose said, looking annoyed, "She left the girls' dorms a half hour ago to meet her date."

Just then, the doors of the Great Hall opened and everyone turned to watch the Durmstrang students enter with Professor Propanov leading them. Viktor Krum was in the front of the Bulgarian students, accompanied by a pretty girl in blue dress robes who seemed vaguely familiar to Harry.

Harry's eyes narrowed as Krum and the girl came closer to him and Ginny, then his eyes widened as he recognized her. It was Hermione.

She was dressed in a lovely set of periwinkle-blue robes. Her hair was no longer bushy but sleek and shiny and twisted up in a lovely knot at the back of her head. She looked just as lovely as Ginny and Rose.

Harry then heard McGonagall's voice call out, "Champions, over here, please."

Harry and Ginny walked over to McGonagall after giving Ron and Rose a 'see you later'. Once Krum, Hermione and Fleur and her date, Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch captain were with them, the Assistant Headmistress explained to them that they would all enter in a procession once the other students were seated.

When the Entrance Hall was empty, McGonagall told them to arrange themselves in pairs and follow her. As the champions and their

partners did as she bade and walked through the Hall towards top of the Hall, everyone applauded them.

Harry saw that the walls of the Hall were covered in sparkling silver frost and hundreds of garlands of mistletoe and ivy crossed the ceiling. Instead of four long House tables, there were now about a hundred smaller round tables set for a dozen people each.

The large round table at the top of the Hall that they were now approaching was already occupied by the five judges and Professor Dumbledore. Golden plates were set out in front of each seat, though they appeared empty. Menus were also set standing on the table.

Harry held Ginny's seat out for her.

"My, what a gentleman you are tonight, Mr. Potter," Ginny said to him in his mind as she sat down, a smile forming on her face.

"Only for you, milady love," Harry said to her mentally, a smile also on his face.

Dumbledore demonstrated how to order the food by speaking his order to his plate and the students followed suit.

As they ate, Fleur and Viktor commented on the decorations and compared them and the castle itself to their own schools. All throughout the meal, Harry noticed that Davies barely ate as he hung on every word coming out of Fleur's mouth. He struggled to keep from laughing at the lovestruck older boy.

"Harry, don't you laugh at him," Ginny said to him in his mind, *"There are times you look like that when you're with me."*

"All right, Gin. I'll behave. It's just that he looks like he'd been hit by a bludger several times."

"Well, leave it alone, Harry and I'll make it up to you later."

"Promise?" Harry asked, amusement in his mental voice.

"Yes, Harry. Now, finish your tart."

“Yes, dear.”

Once everyone was done eating, Dumbledore asked everyone to stand and moved the tables to the side with his wand. He then conjured a platform and several musical instruments. Once this was done, the Weird Sisters, a popular wizarding band, came into the Hall and took their places on the platform, to the wild applause of the crowd.

Harry realized what this meant and nervously looked at Ginny.

“May I have this dance, Ginny?” he asked her.

Ginny grinned, “Of course, Harry.”

Harry and Ginny moved to the center of the Hall, followed by the other champions and their partners. The Weird Sisters started with a slow mournful tune.

As they danced, Harry felt himself floating. He held her close as they swayed to the music. By half through the song, most of the students had joined the champion pairs on the dance floor.

The next song was a little faster but Harry and Ginny stayed close to each other. By the third song, another slow one, they were really enjoying themselves

Harry felt like they were the only ones dancing in the Hall.

“Harry?” Ginny said in his mind.

“Yes, Gin?” he answered back mentally.

“You really dance well,” she said to him, mentally, *“Your lessons with your mum turned out well.”*

In preparation for the dance, Harry had gotten permission to floo to Potter Manor every evening during the week before the Ball to take dance lessons from his mother.

"Yeah, they sure did, Gin," he said to her, "I'm glad she was patient with me. I think I stepped on her feet more than on the floor that first night."

"Well, it was worth it, Harry," Ginny said, "It's allowing us to be this close in a room full of adults." She snuggled up to him as they slowly danced.

A little later, Harry saw Hermione and Krum dancing. They seemed to be enjoying themselves.

After the fifth song, Harry could feel Ginny tiring and decided that they needed a break.

"Gin, let's sit this one out," he asked her in her mind, "Let me get us a couple of drinks."

"Sure, Harry," Ginny said, smiling at him as she looked up.

They walked off the dance floor, which was already full of people.

"Go find us a table, Ginny," Harry said, "I'll get us a couple of butterbeers."

"Okay, Harry," Ginny said.

Ginny looked around the tables and spotted Ron and Rose sitting at an otherwise empty one.

As she approached them, she saw the glum expression on her best friend's face. Ron seemed to have his attention on something other than his date.

Ginny looked in the direction Ron was looking in and found it was toward the area where Hermione and Krum were as they danced. As she came up beside them, she saw that Ron's eyes were narrowed.

Ginny frowned and sat down beside Rose, who seemed to be looking elsewhere as well. Ginny touched her shoulder.

Rose started and looked at Ginny. She seemed surprised to see her sitting beside her.

"Rose," Ginny said, "are you all right? Is everything okay?"

Rose waved her hand. "Yeah, I'm okay. Everything peachy," she said and turned her gaze away from Ginny, the glum expression forming again on her face.

Ginny followed her gaze and saw that she seemed to be watching the group of Neville, Dean and Seamus, who were dancing with their dates.

Just then, Harry came up with two bottles of butterbeer and handed one to Ginny.

"What's going on, Ginny?" he asked through their mental link, *"Why are these two just sitting here?"*

"I think Ron's distracted, Harry," Ginny said to him in his mind, *"He's watching Hermione and Viktor Krum. I think he's jealous."*

Harry's eyes widened. "What!" he blurted out loud before regaining control of himself.

"You mean Ron's fancies Hermione?" Harry said to Ginny mentally, *"When did this happen?"*

"Honestly, love. You can be so thick sometimes. I've noticed this months ago, sometime last summer. Ron seems to be livelier whenever she was around."

"Blimey. What do we do now?"

"Right now, I think you better help with your sister. She seems down in the dumps, too. It may be for the same reason but I'm not so sure. Go dance with her."

"Well, all right."

Harry walked over to Rose and said, "Come on, Rose. Let's dance."

Rose shrugged, "Sure, whatever. It isn't like **my date** is interested in dancing with me anyway." She sent a glare at Ron.

Rose turned to Ginny as Harry pulled her out of her chair, "Oh, Ginny, when Hermione comes by, I wouldn't sit too near Ron if I were you."

She then allowed her brother to lead her to the dance floor, sparing a last look at the group of fourth year Gryffindors boys.

Thankfully, Harry led her farther into the crowd, away from his dorm mates.

Ginny turned to Ron but before she could say anything, Hermione dropped into the seat vacated by Rose.

"It's hot, isn't it?" she asked as she fanned herself with her hand.

Ginny smirked, "Yeah, I noticed. So, where's your date?"

"Viktor went to get us a couple of drinks," Hermione said, still fanning herself.

"So, it's Viktor, is it? Ron said then, "What, hasn't he asked you to call him Vicky yet?"

"What are you going on about, Ron?" Hermione asked him.

"Have you wondered why he asked you to this Ball, Hermione?" Ron asked, "After all, lots of other girls have been following him all over the school for the past month and a half."

Hermione's eyes narrowed, "I asked him that when he asked me, Ron. He said that he found me attractive especially since I wasn't following him like the others and he wanted to get to know me better."

"Hah! What a load of bull," Ron said, "and you fell for it."

"What do you mean by that, Ron?" Ginny asked, her own eyes narrowing.

"Isn't it obvious?" Ron asked, waving his arms around, "He's from Durmstrang. He's going out with Hermione because he knows who

one of her best friends is. He's trying to get close to Harry....to get inside information on him or even get close enough to Harry to jinx him."

Hermione stared at Ron, looking like she had slapped her, "Are you daft, Ron? We haven't talked about Harry. He hasn't even mentioned my being friends with Harry."

"He probably was waiting until later, when you were warmed up to him, maybe even snogging him before he started on that," Ron said bitterly as he grabbed a bottle of butterbeer from the table and took a swig.

Hermione glared at Ron, her eyes showing her fury at his insensitivity. Ginny felt a surge of power from the older girl and she slowly got to her feet and stepped away as Ron took another swig from the bottle.

Suddenly, the bottle in Ron's hand exploded, drenching him in butterbeer. Ginny just avoided getting splashed.

"You insufferable git!" Hermione shouted at him. She jumped to her feet and walked swiftly onto the dance floor, disappearing into the crowd.

Ron watched her go with a mixture of fear and indignation, butterbeer dripping down his face.

Ginny just looked at him with pity and contempt. She looked around for Harry and Rose and saw them at the edge of the crowd, walking back to them.

Harry looked furious as he stared at Ron, obviously having heard every word of Hermione and Ron's conversation.

Ginny quickly grabbed his hand. *"Come on, love. Let's go for a walk. Don't mind Ron. Hermione's already given him something to think about."* She steered him out toward the Entrance Hall and down to the rose garden that had been created in front of the castle's front doors.

Harry allowed himself to be led down the winding ornamental paths. There were fairy lights that winked and twinkled in the rose bushes. Large stone statues and stone benches were scattered about the garden. Harry heard the splashing of water, which indicated that there was a fountain somewhere. Couples were seated on some of the benches.

Finally, Ginny made him sit on an empty stone bench a distance from the front doors. The fountain was right beside the bench. The water sparkled in the moonlight. They sat side by side, their arms around each other.

The sound of the flowing water and Ginny's presence soothed Harry and calmed him down from his anger with Ron.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Ginny asked him mentally.

Harry sighed, "I guess so. I can't believe what Ron said to Hermione. How can he think Krum asked her to the Ball just to get to me? Has he even looked at how Hermione looked tonight? She's gorgeous, just as beautiful as you and Rose, Gin."

Ginny smiled, "Yes, she is, Harry. I think the problem is that Ron noticed and he was just acting jealous."

"And he was jealous because he fancies her," Harry was genuinely puzzled, *"They seem to row half of the time over some stupid thing."*

Ginny smirked, "I think it may be a form of sexual foreplay for them."

"That's just weird," Harry said, grimacing, *"Wait a minute. Does that mean Hermione fancies him, too?"*

"Of course it does," Ginny said, *"Otherwise, she wouldn't be as upset with him as she is."*

Harry shook his head, "That's just great. Why don't they just say something? I mean, if they just told each other they fancied one another, this mess could have been avoided."

"I don't know if it can be that simple, Harry," Ginny said, "I think they're scared of how the other will react to knowing that."

Harry sighed, trying to come to terms with his two best friends developing feelings for each other.

Just then, they heard a commotion not too far from them, something like some bushes being blasted, followed by squeals. Then they heard an unpleasantly familiar voice say, "Ten points from Hufflepuff, Fawcett and ten points from Ravenclaw, Stebbins!"

A few seconds later, the familiar figure of Snape came around the corner. He stopped when he saw Harry and Ginny. A sneer crossed his face, "Ah, Potter and Miss Weasley. I hope you two were not doing something inappropriate, something your parents would disapprove of. Of course, I doubt your parents would entirely disapprove of something like that, Potter."

Harry felt a wave of annoyance and anger course through him.

Ginny took his hand and squeezed it, "Don't do anything you may regret, Harry. The git is just jealous."

Harry firmly clamped down his anger, "We were just sitting here, Professor, enjoying the peace and quiet of this spot. We weren't planning anything inappropriate."

Snape eyed them suspiciously for a moment then said, "Very well. Get back inside. I noticed before coming out here that your sister didn't seem very happy, Potter. I assume that Mr. Weasley is her companion for the evening. It seems he is neglecting her. I suggest you address the issue before someone else does, in a manner you may not approve." Snape then left them with a swish of his cloak.

"Now what was that about?" Ginny asked Harry, softly, "It's like he was concerned that Rose wasn't enjoying the Ball."

"I know what you mean," Harry said, "It's strange. Anyway, as much as I hate to agree with him, he's right. Ron's not been paying attention to his date. Even if he fancies Hermione, he invited

someone else tonight and he should be concerned with her. I warned Ron about this.”

“Yes, you did. As much as I love him, my brother can be a really insensitive git, All right, let’s go.”

They both got up and walked back inside to the Great Hall. They spotted Ron still sitting at his table, still dejected and unconcerned. Rose wasn’t with him.

“Ron,” Harry said when he got to the table, “Where’s Rose?”

“Huh?” Ron said, intelligently, looking up at Harry.

“You know, Rose, my sister, your date,” Harry said, emphasizing the last two phrases.

“Oh, yeah,” Ron said, “Her. I think Neville asked her to dance with him.”

“And you let him?” Ginny asked, incredulous, “She’s your date, Ron. You should be dancing with her.”

Ron shrugged, “I wasn’t in the mood. Neville asked her. She asked me. I said she could.”

Harry ran his hand over his face, exasperated with his best mate.

“Oh, forget him, Harry,” Ginny said to him in his mind, “Let the prat brood. At least someone is paying Rose some attention. Come on, let’s get back on that dance floor.”

“All right, Gin. We can’t let Ron ruin our evening.”

Harry and Ginny danced until midnight, when the Weird Sisters finally wrapped up their act. Everyone gave them a long and loud last round of applause then moved toward the Entrance Hall. Many people wished the Ball could have gone on longer, including Harry and Ginny, who had enjoyed dancing in each other’s arms.

They found Hermione in the Entrance Hall, saying goodbye to Krum before the Bulgarian boy went back to the Durmstrang ship. She saw them and headed for them, a wide smile on her face.

“So,” Ginny said, a smirk forming on her face, “enjoy your evening with the Greatest Seeker in the world?” It was a title Fred had given to Krum during the World Cup.

“Yes, it was quite a night,” Hermione said, “He’s not too loquacious but he paid attention to me all night. You both know I’m not one of those fan girls, but he was so gallant. I’m not used to someone staring at me like I’m a beauty queen.”

“Well, you are, Hermione,” Harry said, “Tonight, you, Rose and Ginny showed just how beautiful you three can be.”

Hermione playfully slapped him on the arm, “Harry! Don’t tease me like that.”

“Well, it’s true, Hermione,” Ginny said, smiling, “You look just awesome tonight.”

Hermione blushed, “Thanks, Ginny. You and Rose looked great tonight, too. Speaking of Rose, I saw her dancing with Neville for the last hour. Where is she?”

“I think she went back to the common room with Parvati, Neville, Lavender, Seamus and Dean about fifteen minutes ago.” Ginny said, “We should get back, too.”

As they stood at the foot of the marble staircase, they heard someone call Harry’s name. Turning they saw Draco Malfoy coming up to them.

“What do you want, Malfoy?” Harry asked.

“Just a word, Potter,” Draco said, “Don’t worry. I don’t plan on attacking you.”

“All right,” Harry said. He turned to Ginny and Hermione, “Go on to the common room. I don’t think he’ll try anything.” He squeezed

Ginny's hand before letting her go. He watched the two girls climb the staircase for a while before turning back to Draco.

"All right, Malfoy," Harry said, "What do you want now?"

"I just wanted to warn you, Potter," Draco said, "Your entry into this tournament is a plot by the Dark Lord to get rid of you."

"Oh, yeah?" Harry said, "How do you know this, Malfoy?"

"It doesn't matter how I know," Draco said, "Just watch your back, Potter. They'll try again to get you in the next task. I don't know how but just be ready."

Harry stood there for a moment, studying the Slytherin, "All right, Malfoy. Thanks for the warning."

"It's just a little payback for saving my brother's life, Potter," Draco said, "I'll let you know if I hear anything else." He turned around and descended the stairs to the Dungeons.

Harry watched him for a few seconds then went up the marble staircase to Gryffindor Tower, baffled a bit at Malfoy's behavior. Was Malfoy changing his ways? Did he really care for Ti that much?

Harry was about to ask Ginny's opinion when he noticed that she was distracted by something else and hadn't heard his conversation with Malfoy. Then, Harry saw what had distracted Ginny and sped up his ascent.

When he got to the Fat Lady, she was asleep. He had to say 'Fairy Lights' three times before she awoke and let him in. He walked through the Portrait Hole to find Ron and Hermione in a blazing row in the middle of the common room. Ginny, Rose and the rest of Harry's year were present, staring uncertainly at the two fighting friends.

Harry's two best friends were ten feet apart, glaring and shouting at each other.

"Well, if you don't like me going out with Viktor, Ron," Hermione was shouting at Ron, "then you know the solution."

“And what would that be?” Ron asked, a sneer on his face.

“The next time there’s a ball, ask me before someone else does!” she screamed at him. She then turned on her heel and marched up the stairs to the girls’ dormitories. Ginny and Rose gave Ron a final glare and followed their friend.

Ron just stood there, stunned and looking much like a floundering goldfish, unable to form any coherent words.

Neville, Dean and Seamus gave him pitying looks. Harry gave him a disgusted look before climbing up to the boys’ dormitories.

Chapter 49: Holiday blues

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. However, Rose, Andrew, Daisy, Ti and Maggie are my own creations.

As she came out of the fireplace in Potter Manor, Ginny just managed to stay on her feet. It was Sunday, two days after Christmas and most of the students, including the Potters and their friends, had gone home for the remaining week of the holidays. Ginny was looking forward to some 'alone time' with Harry while Ron was stuck at the Burrow doing chores.

She brushed herself off and looked around. The living room was empty; however she could hear muffled talking coming from the kitchen. She went up to the door to the kitchen and peeked in. A smile broke out on her face at the sight that greeted her.

Harry was seated inside the kitchen, feeding his youngest brother and sister their bottles as they lay in their basinetts. He was facing the door but his concentration was obviously focused on the twins since he hadn't acknowledged her presence yet, verbally or mentally. Ginny could see the bright smile on his face as he cooed and talked to them softly.

"Hey. Andie," Harry said, "You really like that, don't you? That's it, drink up. Soon, you're going to be able to fly just like your big brother."

"Come on, Daisy," he said, turning to his youngest sister, "You can finish this bottle. Yes, that's a good girl."

Ginny's smile turned into a grin. Harry was great with the twins. Over the last few months, whether she saw it visually or through their bond, Ginny had seen him treat them gently and lovingly, with no hint of annoyance, even when they happened to interrupt their time together.

As a big brother, he was so different from Bill or George. As much as she loved her oldest brothers, they hadn't been exactly shining examples of older brothers when she was little.

Her mother often left her and her other brothers in the care of the oldest boys whenever she needed to leave the Burrow. However, as soon as her back was turned, Bill and George would disappear, leaving their younger siblings to fend for themselves. It was only when Ginny turned four that Bill paid her more attention, especially when he was home from Hogwarts.

As she continued to gaze at her boyfriend-soul mate, Ginny was happy for Daisy and Andrew having an older brother who was willing to take care of them like this. He'd make a great dad one day. She hoped that would be only a few years from now.

She recalled from Hermione and Rose's research on the Bond that bonded pairs were allowed to marry once one of them became of age. That would make it only three more years for them to wait, until Harry turned seventeen.

Ginny heard a noise behind her and turned, her wand appearing in her wand faster than lightning.

"Whoa, hold on there, Ginny. It's only me," Lily said.

Ginny felt her face turn red with embarrassment, "Sorry, Mrs,er, Lily."

"That's all right, Ginny," Lily said, waving her apology away, "It's good you're alert and not taking your surroundings for granted. It's sad that these times need that but hopefully, it won't be for long."

"I hope so, too," Ginny said.

"Well, let's leave the morose thoughts behind," Lily said, "I need your help with a problem."

"What sort of problem?" Ginny asked, wondering why Harry had not mentioned any kind of problem to her.

Lily sighed, "It's Rose. Since she and Harry came home yesterday, she's stayed in her room except for meals. Harry's been too wrapped up with the twins to really notice so I'm not surprised that you don't know about it. Why don't you go talk to her? I haven't been able to get anything out of her. Maybe you can."

Ginny nodded, "All right, Lily. I'll go right up there and see if I can't drag her out of there."

Ginny went up the stairs and down the hall to Rose's door. She knocked on the door but didn't wait for an answer before opening the door.

Rose was lying on her bed, back to the door and facing the window.

"Hey, Rose," Ginny said, her voice bright and sunny, "what's up. Mind if I come in?"

When Rose didn't answer, Ginny went in and closed the door behind her. She sat down on the bed, behind Rose.

"Rose?" Ginny said softly, "What is it? Are you still down about Ron neglecting you at the Ball?"

When Rose still didn't answer, Ginny added, "Or are you mooning over one of your brother's other roommates?"

Rose stiffened but didn't turn around or even say a word.

Ginny gently touched her shoulder, "Hey, it's all right. Merlin knows I've mooned over Harry a lot over the years."

Rose sat up and turned to her. Ginny wasn't surprised to see her wiping her eyes.

"Yeah," Rose said, "I've seen you do that, a lot."

"So," Ginny said, "Who is it who's caught the fancy of Rose Potter, hm? It wouldn't be, say, Seamus Finnegan?"

"What!" Rose said, "That bloody twit? He's so in love with his Irish brogue. He acts like he's Merlin's gift to girls. He isn't anything like N.." Rose gulped and her eyes widened as a smirk grew on Ginny's face.

"Hah! I thought so," Ginny said, "You fancy Neville Longbottom."

"No, I don't!" Rose said almost immediately, before turning red, "Well, um, maybe. Oooh! All right, I admit it. I like Neville, okay? Happy?" She flopped back down on her bed.

"Didn't you dance with him at the Ball?" Ginny asked, "What's got your knickers in a twist, then?"

Rose turned to look at her, "Yes, we danced. I thought it was a dream come true. Something like what happened to you and Harry. He even invited me to sit with him, Dean, Seamus, Lavender and Parvati."

"So, why are you so down now?" Ginny asked, "The boy you fancy asked you to dance with him even if he was at the Ball with someone else, yet you're acting like your pet hippogriff died. Why for Merlin's sake? You should be daydreaming about going to Hogsmeade with him."

"I would except it seems he just sees me as Harry Potter's bloody pathetic sister," Rose said, almost shouting the last three words, "Never mind we've been doing all that physical and magical training for the past summer."

Ginny raised an eyebrow, "And what brought you to that barmy conclusion?"

"On our way back to Gryffindor Tower, I overheard Parvati asking Neville why he danced with me and he told her that he found it sad that Harry's sister wasn't enjoying herself." Rose said, "Can you believe that? He didn't refer to me by my name. He called me Harry's sister!"

Ginny patted her leg, "That's too bad, Rose. I can sympathize. I think if it weren't for the Bond, Harry might still be thinking of me as Ron's little sister."

"Yeah, I've heard you complain about it for years now," Rose said, "I wasn't really sympathetic then, since it was my brother you were talking about. But, now I know exactly how you felt. It's really bleeding awful."

“Well, you can’t stay in here all day, Rose,” Ginny said, “Mooning over a bloke whose too thick to realize what a great person you are.”

“Yes, I can, Ginny,” Rose said, turning away from her.

“Oh, no, you can’t,” Ginny said, “If you stay here much longer, Harry will realize you haven’t been out of this room other than at mealtimes. What do you think he’ll do if he finds out Neville’s hurt your feelings? You wouldn’t want Neville turned out of the Marauders, do you? Or worse, pranked by him and the others? I’m sure he didn’t mean to hurt you. He seemed to care enough about you to see that you enjoyed yourself at the Ball, which is more than I can say for a certain brother of mine.”

“Oh yeah,” Rose said, facing her again, “How is your git of a brother anyway? After that scene with Hermione in the common room, I haven’t seen hide or hair of him. Hasn’t done a runner, has he? I would, if I were him.”

“Oh, Mum’s got him busy doing some chores at home,” Ginny said, grinning, “Some how she got wind of what he did and she wasn’t happy with the prat.” She looked at Rose speculatively, “How about you get off this bed and help me plan a little lesson for the wanker?”

“All right, Gin,” Rose said, “Why not? Let’s get Harry, Fred and George in on it. I’m sure they can help us think of something great.”

“Now you’re talking,” Ginny said, grabbing her hand and hauling her off the bed, “Come on.”

Ginny was about to open the door when she stopped and looked at Rose, “One piece of advice though, Rose, I don’t think you should just lie around waiting for Neville to come to his senses. I mean, he may or he may not. In the meantime, I noticed a whole gaggle of blokes who were impressed with how you looked that night of the Ball. If one of them happened to ask you out, you should go on and go with him.”

Rose looked at her, a bit uncertain and skeptical, “Are you sure?”

“Of course,” Ginny said, “You should just enjoy yourself. Don’t let pining away for some clueless bloke, no matter how wonderful he may seem, keep you from getting to know other blokes. That’s what being a teenager is for, after all.”

Rose looked thoughtful for a moment then she shrugged, “Okay, sure. I’ll give it a go, if someone asks me, that is.”

Ginny smiled, “Oh, I’m sure someone will, just you wait. Now, let’s find that hot brother of yours and tell him our plans for that git of a brother of mine.”

“Ginny!” Rose said, a grimace forming on her face, “Can you please not talk about my brother that way. It’s just so gross. Anyway, you probably already know where Harry is.”

Ginny just grinned and led the way out of the room.

When they got hold of Harry, they found him more than willing to give Ron a little lesson. He also agreed with the idea to get help from Fred and George. Harry also suggested approaching Sirius for some ideas.

The rest of the day passed quickly with the three enjoying themselves as they watched over Daisy and Andrew.

The next few days, Rose spent more time with her twin siblings, allowing Ginny and Harry to spend more time with each other. They spent it mostly cuddling and kissing, simply enjoying the presence of the other, though they sometimes practiced some spell work and dueling in the Manor’s Dueling Room.

Ti and the Longbottom siblings came over after breakfast two days later. They played a great game of three-on-three Quidditch with Rose, Ginny and Harry. When Neville was placed on her team, Rose just barely managed to keep herself from blushing and her mind on the game.

Maggie, on the other hand, was a bit nervous around Ti, especially during lunch. Luckily, Neville didn’t seem to notice and neither, it seemed, did Ti.

Later in the afternoon, after the Longbottom's and Ti had gone home, Harry was sitting on one of the lawn chairs on the porch with Ginny leaning against him and her head on his chest. As his arms encircled her, Harry nonchalantly asked her through their Bond, *"So, when did my sister get interested in Neville?"*

Ginny was so shocked she hesitated for a moment before answering him verbally, "Er, what gave you that idea, Harry?"

"Come on, Gin," He said to her mentally, "I've noticed her turning a little red whenever he was around for the past year. She's been hiding it well lately, but I could still see her hesitate a bit with him during the game today. I think she may have told you about it, though I can't imagine how you were able to hide it from me unless she only told you recently."

Ginny sighed before answering him in his mind, "All right, Harry. You're right about Rose having a crush on Neville. I'm not sure how long she's had a crush on him but I believe it's only been a few months. She just told me about it two days ago. Now don't you go big brother on her, it's her life. Anyway, Neville doesn't know a thing about it."

"But he danced with her at the Ball!"

"He did it as a friend, Harry. He saw her being miserable, what with Ron brooding over Hermione and Krum, and decided to help her. I doubt he's interested in her like that. At any rate, that's none of your business in the same way Ron has no business interfering in our relationship."

Harry thought about it for about a minute before replying, "All right, Gin. Unlike my git of a best mate, I trust my sister enough to let her make her own decisions about who she likes."

"That's very mature, Harry," Ginny said. She turned around in his arms and gave him a searing kiss, "Now, speaking of your git of a best mate, I just thought of another idea to teach him that lesson we've been meaning to."

The Potters and Weasleys celebrated New Year's Eve three days later at the Burrow. Hermione, Sirius, Remus and Ti were invited to join both families, just like the year before. In addition, Samantha Turgis was also there, as Sirius' guest. Arthur had been thinking of inviting Dumbledore but Molly and Lily were both still upset with the elderly wizard for letting Harry take part in the Triwizard Tournament, and therefore that idea was immediately quashed.

Ron was quiet the whole evening as his gaze shifted nervously from Hermione to Rose and back again to Hermione. Neither girl paid him any attention, which made him even more nervous. Only the adults were talking to him. Even his appetite was diminished.

At midnight, Harry and Ginny shared another sweet kiss as fireworks brought by Sirius and Remus exploded above the backyard. Ron looked at them with barely any emotion on his face then said a mumbled goodnight to everyone in the vicinity before heading up to bed in his bedroom.

As he disappeared into the house, Harry exchanged looks of anticipation with Fred, George and Ginny. A few minutes later, a very loud scream ripped through the house.

"That sounded like Ron," Molly said, as she started to run toward the kitchen door, "He's being attacked!"

Arthur looked around, confusion on his face, "Who could it be? The wards all seem to be intact."

James, Remus and Sirius had pulled out their wands and started following Molly. Sirius looked over his shoulder and said, "You kids just stay here with Lily."

Just as Molly reached the kitchen door, Ron rushed out of the house, nearly knocking his mother over. He was barefoot, dressed in a set of pajamas of a glaring orange color and there was a look of pure terror on his face. "S-s-sp-spiders!" he yelled, "They're all over my room!"

Before anyone could say anything else, a puff of smoke surrounded Ron. When it cleared, Ron had undergone several outrageous physical changes. His hair had lengthened and changed to a silvery-

blonde color. He was now dressed in a long evening gown and a pair of high heels had appeared on his bare feet. In fact, he could have been Fleur Delacour's twin at the Ball.

As the adults stood with stunned looks on their faces, Harry, Ginny, Fred, George, and Rose broke into loud bouts of laughter. The others looked at them, bewildered for a moment before one of them cottoned on to what had happened.

"You guys pranked Ron," Sirius said and a grin formed on his face, "I guess this was for what happened at the Ball, eh?"

"You got that right," Harry said, in between laughs, "Hey, how'd you find out about that?"

"Oh, someone who's like a son to me happened to mention to me that Ron ignored his date for most of the evening then got into a row with Hermione," Sirius said, smirking at Ron who was glaring at Harry.

Fred and George started taking turns extolling Ron's 'beauty' and his lovely outfit. This was enough to cause Sirius, Remus, Ti, Hermione, Bill, George and James to join in the laughter and Harry, Ginny and Rose to drop to the ground, rolling around in their own mirth. Even Arthur, Sam and Lily were smiling. Only Percy looked unaffected.

"Boys!" Molly said to Fred and George, "Stop that this instant." Unfortunately, her usually stern manner was offset by her attempts to stifle her own laughter.

"Mum! Not you, too!" Ron whined, "Someone get me out of this thing!" He started stamping his foot, causing him to lose his balance and fall over since he wasn't used to walking in high heels.

That caused everyone to burst into fresh gales of laughter, including Molly. Percy just snorted.

"Fine!" Ron bellowed, "I'm getting out of this myself." With that, he got up and slowly made his way back into the house, his gait unsteady due to the heels.

Everyone else was now out of breath from laughing so hard.

“Oh, that was really good, Harry,” Rose said, in between taking in breaths, “It was just as good as what we did to Malfoy at the end of last year.”

Harry just shook his head, still trying to catch his breath.

“Ron should be glad we did it here,” Ginny said, smiling, “instead of at Hogwarts at the welcoming feast.”

“So, what charms did you use on him?” Bill asked, “What was that about the spiders in his room?”

“Well,” Rose said, “we used a modification of a glamour charm and a hair coloring charm, together with a clothes transfiguration charm.”

“I actually cast the charms on him last night while he was sleeping,” Ginny said, “Since we wanted it to happen tonight without him knowing who was involved, we attached a trigger charm to all three charms, keyed to saying the word ‘spider’ three times. He must have said it at least twice on his way down. Remember, spiders are the one thing he’s really terrified of, in fact, the only thing besides food that will get him running.”

“So when he came down yelling about the spiders.....,” Sirius said.

“....he triggered the spells,” James said, grinning.

“How’d you get him to yell about spiders?” Remus asked.

“Well,” Harry said, snickering, “I sneaked up to his room when Molly called us for dinner and cast an illusion charm on all his things. As soon as he lighted the room up, every surface of his room looked like it was crawling with loads of the little buggers.”

“Brilliant work,” Remus said, “That was good teamwork, too.”

“Yes,” Sirius said, “Really good work worthy of the Marauders.”

“Thanks,” the teen Marauders all said together.

"Well," Molly said, "I better go and see if he's back to normal and he doesn't see any more spiders." She looked at the children, "I don't usually condone this type of thing, but for once, I'll let it pass without any scolding." She then walked off towards the house.

The other adults moved off to discuss other things while the children gathered together, still discussing the prank on Ron.

"Of course, like Gin said, he should be glad we didn't do this in front of the whole school like I wanted to," Rose said, "Selfish prat. As it is, it's not near enough payback for what he did."

"Leave it along, Rose," Hermione said, a smirk on her face, "Embarrassing him in front of his family is payback enough for me. I doubt he'd forget it anytime soon, considering the prank was close to the one we did on Malfoy. You know he'll hate that when he realizes it. That should keep him in line."

"All right, Hermione," Harry said, "If you and Rose think this was enough, we won't do anything else to the git." He turned to Rose, "Well, sis, what do you think?"

Rose looked thoughtful for a moment before saying, "All right, if Hermione is satisfied, then I am, too. At any rate, I doubt he'll be speaking to us for a while which is fine to me."

They all agreed, though, not to ignore Ron once they were back in school.

Molly soon came back leading a subdued Ron, back in his orange pajamas. With a push from his mother, Ron walked up to Rose and Hermione like a condemned prisoner on Death Row.

"Er, Rose," Ron said, looking down at his feet, "I, I, I'm sorry for the way I acted at the Ball. I shouldn't have ignored you, Rose. I promised Harry that I'd make the Ball enjoyable to you and I broke that promise. I'm sorry. You can prank me all you want just to make up for making your night miserable."

Rose eyed Ron for a few seconds then said, "All right, Ron. I forgive you. At least, you had the sense to let me dance with Neville. That

made up a bit for your neglect. We've agreed the prank we just did is enough payback. Just don't look to me to be a last minute date for you ever again."

Ron's shoulders slumped as he nodded. He then turned a wary eye to Hermione, "Er, Hermione, I'm sorry for getting mad at you for going with Krum. I guess I was surprised that he was your mystery date."

"Why, Ronald?" Hermione asked, "Why would that surprise you? Do you think so little of me that you can't believe that someone like Viktor wouldn't ask me out?"

Ron shook his head as he looked down at his feet again then said in a soft, low voice, "It just means that you'd be beyond me, that I would never be worthy of your attention."

Hermione's eyebrows rose. Everyone else looked at Ron with widened eyes.

Hermione's voice was shaking as she asked, "W-w-what are you saying, Ron?"

"I-I-I fancy you, Hermione," Ron said, "I think I have for a couple of years now, but only realized it when I saw you looking so beautiful as you stood beside Krum. I couldn't help but think that I'd lost my chance with you."

Hermione reached out and raised Ron's chin with one of her index fingers so they could look at each other, "But you haven't, Ron," she said softly, "I admit that I was surprised when Viktor asked me out. But I thought someone else that I wanted to go with wouldn't ask me, so I accepted his invitation. If only I had waited a couple more days, then I would have gone with that someone, even if his way of asking me was a bit condescending."

"Y-y-you mean that....?" Ron asked.

"Yes, Ron," Hermione said, looking him directly in the eyes, "I fancy you, too. I've thought of you as more than a friend ever since last year. I never thought you'd feel the same."

Ron grinned, "Then, will you go to Hogsmeade with me?"

"Of course, Ron," Hermione said, a smile forming on her face, "I'd love to."

They then stood staring at each other for a long moment before someone (I think it was Sirius) coughed, twice, making them aware that they had an audience. They both turned red and looked away from each other. Everyone around them was now grinning and smiling.

Harry stepped up to Ron along with Sirius, James, Ti and the other Weasley males as Ginny and Rose whisked Hermione away.

"Way to go, mate," Harry said, slapping Ron's back, "I never thought you could be so eloquent."

"Yeah, bro," Charlie said, "I never thought you had it in you."

"Yes, our youngest brother is growing up," Fred said, sniffing.

"It brings a tear to the eyes," George said, wiping an imaginary tear from his eye.

"Oh, shut it, you," Ron said, turning even more red.

"Why didn't you kiss her?" Bill asked, grinning.

"Er, I was just thinking of that when Sirius made us know that we weren't alone. That's something I definitely want to do when we're by ourselves," Ron said, grinning.

Arthur came up to the boys just then and clapped Ron on the shoulder, "Well, son, that wasn't half bad. It's actually a bit better than the first time I asked Molly out, in our fourth year."

Ron turned red again, "Gee, thanks, Dad. I really could have done without that image."

He sent a glare at James and Sirius who were snickering.

“Hey, Dad,” Harry said, grinning wickedly, “That reminds me of the story of how you asked Mum out at the end of your sixth year.”

James turned white and stammered, “N-n-now, Harry. I don’t think that story needs to get around.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Prongs,” Sirius said, “It may have bearing on tonight’s events.”

They collectively laughed at the expression on James’ face.

Meanwhile, Ginny and Rose had Hermione to one side.

“Wow!” Ginny said, “I never thought Ron would be able to tell you that he fancied you.”

“You knew he fancied me?” Hermione asked, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, I never really noticed before,” Ginny said, “I mean, this last year, I’ve been so wrapped up over Harry.”

“As if you’ve never been wrapped up over him before,” Rose said, smirking.

“Oh, shut it, dear sister-in-law,” Ginny said, grinning to lessen the remark’s sting, “Anyway, I guess I realized it during the Yule Ball with the way he reacted to you and Krum. I’ve never seen him pay attention to someone like that. What’s that muggle saying, ‘if looks could kill?’ Krum would have fallen dead on the dance floor with the way Ron was glaring at him.”

“So he was jealous?” Rose asked, “That’s why he ignored me all evening?”

“Yes, Rose,” Ginny said, “After all, the only reason a bloke would ignore a girl he’s on a date with is another girl.”

Lily came over to them then, saying that the Potters needed to go home since Andrew and Daisy were already asleep. They all said

goodbye to each other, glad that the night had ended on a good note which hopefully was a good omen for the coming year.

Chapter 50: Dates and lockets

Disclaimer: Rose, Andrew and Daisy Potter, Maggie Longbottom and Ti Malfoy/Black are my own creations. Everything else is the work of JKR and is not being used for any personal profit.

The kids returned to Hogwarts two days later on the Hogwarts Express along with the rest of the students. Harry told his friends that the New Marauders would resume their physical regimen upon the resumption of school, including Maggie, if she wanted.

On the first night back, Harry, in a rare show of studiousness, convinced Dumbledore not to exempt him from the end of year exams simply owing to him being a Triwizard champion.

Hermione was beside herself with admiration over her friend's dedication to his studies. Harry confided to Ginny that he just wanted to deserve the grades he would receive at the end of the year. He had always been near the top of the class in the past three years and didn't want to remain there just on the basis of being in the tournament.

The first two weeks of January passed quickly for the students, as they were preoccupied with their new lessons. The third Saturday of January was a scheduled Hogsmeade trip as well as the day of Ron and Hermione's first official date.

Harry awoke that day to find Ron sitting on his bed, looking green and nervous. He got out of bed and sat beside Ron, a look of concern on his face.

"Ron?" Harry asked his best mate, "What's wrong? You aren't getting sick, are you?"

"It's not that, Harry," Ron said, now getting pale, "Do you realize I'm taking Hermione to Hogsmeade today on a REAL DATE! I don't know what to do. I want to make it special for her, for us, but I don't know how." He looked like he was starting to hyperventilate.

"Okay, Ron," Harry said, putting a hand gently on Ron's shoulder, "First of all, close your eyes and take a deep breath."

Harry waited until Ron did as he asked then continued, "Now, relax. It's your first date. From what Sirius and Dad used to tell me, you should keep it simple. It's usually the one where you get to know the girl better. Of course," Harry paused, clutching his chin with his thumb and index finger, "you've known Hermione for the past three years, so that's not the purpose of the date now. You've also gone to Hogsmeade with her before, though I'm usually with you guys."

Harry thought for a moment, and then sighed as he came to a decision. Before he could say something to Ron, Ginny's voice broke into his mind.

*"Harry! You **are not** inviting them along with us today! I don't want to spend the day with my brother and Hermione! I wanted to spend it alone with you. We haven't had that since we got back to school,"* she whined in his mind.

"Please, Gin," he begged her, *"Don't you want this to work out between the two of them? With us along, we can make sure that Hermione has a great time."*

"Come on, Harry! Leave the prat to his own devices. He invited her out weeks ago. He should have planned for something in all that time."

"Come on, Ginny, let's help them, please? I'll make it up to you, on Valentine's Day, I promise. Please?"

After a few seconds of silence as she thought it over, *"All right, Harry. I'll go on a double date with Ron and Hermione. But, Ron better not mess this up. And you better make it up to me, okay?"*

"Thanks, Gin. You won't regret it. Just don't peak into my mind looking for clues about my Valentine's Day plans, okay?"

"Oh, all right, Harry. I promise. Now, I'll tell Hermione about the double date. See you guys for breakfast."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief and turned to Ron, "Uh, Ron? If you like, you and Hermione could go with Ginny and me, sort of like a double date."

Ron looked at him with wide eyes for a second before grinning, "That's a brilliant idea, Harry. That way, you can show me how to act on a date and how to please Hermione."

Harry frowned, "In a way, Ron, but not exactly. I can give you general ideas but for specifics, you better learn how to please Hermione on your own. What I do to please Ginny is probably different from what may please Hermione."

Ron also frowned, "Then, how do I know what will make her happy?"

"Ron, you should know some of that stuff," Harry said, exasperated, "You've been her friend for more than three years."

"Well," Ron said, looking down at his feet, "I do know she likes books and knowing about all sorts of stuff, thing like that."

"All right, Ron," Harry said, shaking his head, "From now on, you better pay attention to what she says and does. Know what her favorite color is, her favorite foods and other things."

"How do I find out those things?" Ron asked, frowning again.

"Pay more attention to her, you git," Harry said, "Then talk to her about anything, not just Quidditch. You know she doesn't like it, especially since it involves flying."

Ron's eyes widened, "Then what do I talk to her about?"

Harry rolled his eyes, "All right. I see this isn't going to be easy. I do remember some stuff about her I've learned over the years. I'll tell you about them while we get dressed. We'd better get a move on. We're supposed to meet Ginny and Hermione over at the Great Hall for breakfast."

Over the next ten minutes, Harry gave Ron as many facts about Hermione as he could remember as they changed. Then they hurried to the Great Hall where they found Ginny and Hermione sitting at the Gryffindor table, already eating.

After a leisurely breakfast, they walked together out the Front Doors, through the grounds down to the front gates of the school, where Filch was waiting to check out the students going to Hogsmeade.

Once they got passed the caretaker, they walked side by side down the path to the village, talking about their recent lessons, especially in DADA where Moody was teaching them very useful information on Dark creatures.

The pathway they followed to Hogsmeade was still wet and soggy but clear of any snow for the first time in weeks.

When they got to the village, Harry whispered to Ron, "Ask Hermione where she wants to go first."

"Uh, 'Mione?" Ron asked, "Where would you like to go first?"

Hermione looked at Ron in surprise since on previous visits to Hogsmeade, Ron would impose his choices on them.

"Well," she said, smiling, "why don't we look at Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop first? I need a couple of new quills. Then we can check out Gladrags."

Ron looked like he almost choked on what Hermione said, but nodded anyway, "Sure, Hermione, uh, let's go." He offered her his slightly shaking hand and she took it with only a second of hesitation.

Harry and Ginny followed behind them, holding hands themselves. They noticed that Ron barely looked at Honeyduke's as he and Hermione passed it.

"Wow!" Ginny said to Harry in his mind, *"I didn't think Ron could walk past the sweets shop and spare it only a glance."*

"You're telling me," Harry said to her, *"He must really like Hermione to follow her like this."*

"Maybe this will work out after all, Harry," Ginny said.

"I hope so, Ginny," Harry said, "Merlin knows we could do with less of their rows."

"I doubt that will change much. Like I said when we discussed this during the Ball, rowing excites them, like a form of foreplay."

"Don't say that, Ginny. It conjures images in my head that I wouldn't care to see," Harry shuddered.

Ginny just smirked and tugged him along in the wake of their friends into the quill shop.

Ron tried hard not to look too bored as Hermione spent fifteen minutes deciding the kind of feather she wanted for her quills. In the end, she chose some eagle quills.

Ginny and Harry spent their time there looking at the more exotic tropical bird quills, laughing as they imagined in their minds what the birds whose feathers they held actually looked like.

From Scrivenshafts', they proceeded to Gladrags Wizardwear, where Hermione and Ginny went off to look at the coming spring fashions in robes, leaving Harry and Ron to their own devices.

The boys found chairs near the front of the store, where Ron noticed he could barely see Zonko's. He looked wistfully at the joke shop. Harry thought he might be regretting that he had asked Hermione to lead the way around the village.

"Hey, Ron," Harry said, hoping to distract him from any regrets, "Have you thought about what to get Hermione for Valentine's Day?"

Ron looked at Harry with a surprised look on his face, "Why would I be thinking of that, Harry?"

Harry sighed, "Ron, you and Hermione are dating. When a girl and a boy are dating, Valentine's Day becomes very important. You need to think about doing something special for Hermione. It will really prove that you like her a lot."

Ron gulped, "If you say so, Harry. I've never really thought about it."

“Well, you better think about it now, Ron,” Harry said, “it’s just three weeks away.”

“All right, Harry.” Ron said, nodding his head, then he looked sheepishly at Harry, “Er, can you give me any suggestions?”

Harry rolled his eyes, “Come on now, Ron. Don’t tell me you’ve never seen your dad do something special for your mum for Valentine’s Day? My dad has done loads of stuff for Mum over the years.”

“Like what?” Ron asked, genuinely interested.

“Well, like give her lots of flowers, take her out to dinner or a show, things like that,” Harry said.

“Did you do that for Ginny last year?” Ron asked.

“Yeah, I gave her a bouquet of roses and a gift then took her out for a picnic,” Harry said.

Ron gulped, “It sounds a bit expensive to me, Harry.”

“Well, I saved part of my allowance for them, though I got my Mum to put together the food we had for the picnic,” Harry said, “so I was able to afford it.”

“So, what are you going to do for Ginny this Valentine’s Day?” Ron asked, eagerly.

“Oh, no,” Harry said, “I can’t tell you. If I think about it, Ginny might find out what I have planned. Besides, I don’t want you to steal my idea.”

Ron scowled but before he could say anything, Hermione and Ginny came up to them.

“Hey,” Hermione said, “what are you guys talking about?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Harry said immediately. He could sense Ginny was barely holding her tongue.

"We're going to talk about this later, Potter, when we're alone," She said to him in his mind.

Harry gulped mentally but didn't answer her.

They exited Gladrag's and stood in front of the shop.

"So, where do we go next?" Hermione asked. Harry and Ginny exchanged glances then looked at Ron.

"It's your call, Ron," Harry said.

"Well, um, why don't we go to that shop that opened last year?" Ron said, "you know, what's its name, the shop where we bought the Christmas gifts?"

Harry groaned a bit mentally since he had wanted to go there without the girls but said, "You mean 'The Little Menagerie,' Ron."

"Yeah, that's the one," Ron said, after which he reached for Hermione again. She gave him a smile and took his hand.

They walked into the store and immediately started looking around separately. It seemed to Harry that there were more pieces of jewelry on display. He saw several items he thought Ginny would love but found the price a little daunting in spite of his considerable allowance. Nonetheless, he put them on his hidden mental list of items he wanted to give Ginny over time.

After a half-hour, Ron approached Harry and whispered to him that he found some things he thought Hermione might like. He showed them to Harry, all the while trying to make sure the girls didn't notice them. Harry gave his opinion on the things he was shown but told Ron that it ultimately was his decision, something Ron didn't really like.

Hermione and Ginny came up to them after a few minutes and dragged them around the store to show them items they found interesting, nice or affordable. Harry knew a hint when he saw one and decided to tell Ron about it later in their dorm.

After another look around, they headed for the Three Broomsticks for lunch. Ginny suggested that they get separate tables for each couple. Hermione agreed wholeheartedly while Ron looked a bit unhappy with that suggestion but said nothing.

With no further words, Ginny dragged Harry over to a booth in the back, away from the other two-thirds of the trio. Harry noticed a large number of students inside the pub, including Cho Chang who was with Cedric Diggory and Neville who was with Seamus and Dean. Rose was at a separate table with Luna Lovegood, Melinda, Lisa and Colin.

Ginny drew his attention away from the rest of the pub by rubbing her fingers lightly on his knee. Harry gulped and struggled to control his reaction. Ginny smiled impishly at him but subsided when a waitress came by to take their orders.

They ate while holding hands and talking through their bond about the things they had seen in the three stores.

When they were done, Harry glanced over to where Ron and Hermione were seated. There were several empty plates around them but it seemed they were talking animatedly. It appeared that they were enjoying themselves well enough without his help.

"Come on, Harry. They're all right over there. I think we can leave them be." She leaned over to him, whispering in his ear, "let's spend the rest of the day away from them, please?"

Harry shivered as her breath brushed his ear, making him forget where they were. He brought his lips down to hers as he said in her mind, "All right, Gin. Let me pay the bill and we can go."

They soon slipped out of the Three Broomsticks, avoiding Ron and Hermione. They walked past Dervish and Banges to the opposite edge of the village from the train station. The lane followed a winding path past a few cottages with large gardens. Beyond them was the foot of the mountain in whose shadow Hogsmeade laid.

They turned a corner and saw a stile at the end of the path with some trees just beyond it. Harry and Ginny climbed over the stile and

looked back. They could barely see the village. There was no sign of any other student. In fact, the only sounds they could hear now were the sounds of nature.

They moved toward the trees. Harry spread his cloak on the ground at the foot of an exceptionally large pine and they sat down on it with Ginny in Harry's lap. They spent a pleasurable hour of intense snogging, with barely a word exchanged between them, verbally or mentally.

Finally, they got up and headed back to the village where they found Ron and Hermione coming out of Dervish and Banges.

"Oi, Harry," Ron said, "where were you guys? We've been looking for you for over an hour."

Ginny spoke up before Harry could answer, "If it's any business of yours, Ron, we took a walk among the trees."

Ron's eyes narrowed a bit but he then shrugged, "How about heading for Zonko's and Honeyduke's now?"

They all agreed and went first into the joke shop. After about twenty minutes, they transferred to Honeyduke's where they spent almost an hour.

Finally, it was time to head back to the castle. They trudged back all the way to Gryffindor Tower.

At the foot of the stairs to the dorms, Hermione thanked Ron for a nice time then she went up to her dorm to rest before dinner. Ron grinned and thanked Harry for his help. Harry breathed a sigh of relief but hoped Ron could do the rest of the dating thing on his own.

After that day, Ron and Hermione began to sit beside each other during meals instead of across from each other as they used to do. They also seemed to bicker less and with less of the energy they used to. During the New Marauders' early morning runs, they paced each other. Harry and his other friends were bewildered by the change but were glad of it.

Then, before anyone knew it, it was Valentine's Day. It was a Sunday and Dumbledore had allowed another Hogsmeade visit day.

Harry awoke that day feeling proud that he had kept his gift to Ginny a secret from her. He could just imagine the happiness she would feel when she saw the gift he had carefully wrapped for her. Looking at his bedside clock, he saw it was just after six in the morning.

As he felt Ginny stir from her sleep, he softly spoke in her mind, *"Good morning, dear Gin. Happy Valentine's Day, love."*

"Harry," she replied, still a bit sleepy. When what he had said finally registered in her mind, she came fully awake, *"Harry! It's Valentine's Day! Happy Valentine's to you too, sweetie! Now, when are you going to give me my gift?"*

"Impatient this morning, aren't we?" He said to her, a laughing tone in his mental voice.

"Well, I've been very curious about your gift. I couldn't get anything out of you for the past three weeks. It's been frustrating to say the least," She said.

"Okay, Ginny. Meet me in the common room in ten minutes." Harry said.

"Make it fifteen, Harry. I still need another five minutes to fully wake up."

Harry was sitting in the still empty common room twelve minute later, in his usual armchair in front of the fireplace. Three minutes later, Ginny came bounding down the stairs, dressed in a green blouse and blue jeans and sat down promptly in Harry's lap.

"Oof," Harry cried, "You really are eager, aren't you?"

"Of course, Harry," Ginny said, wrapping her arms around his neck, "I'm always eager to be with you. I can't wait to be married and wake up every day beside you."

Harry's eyes bulged and his face turned crimson as his mind assimilated what she had said, "Er, me, too. I didn't realize you felt that strongly about it."

"You bet I do, Harry," Ginny said, "You can feel it through our Bond." She then brought her lips up to his. Harry eagerly returned the kiss.

When they broke the kiss before passing out from lack of air, they noticed several minutes had passed. Ginny laid her head on Harry's chest as they caught their breaths.

Once their racing hearts were back to normal, Ginny raised her head to look up at Harry, "All right, Potter." *"That's enough stalling. Where's my present?"*

Harry chuckled, *"all right, you little minx. Here it is. I hope you like it."*

Harry gave her a bouquet of a dozen roses then pulled a small box wrapped in white paper covered with red hearts out of his pocket and handed it to her.

Ginny carefully placed the flowers to one side. She quickly removed the wrapping from the box and opened it.

Inside was a heart-shaped golden locket on a gold chain. She opened the locket and inside was a picture of the two of them, arms around each other. Every so often, they would share a kiss.

Ginny wrapped her arms around Harry and gave him a hug worthy of her mother followed by another passionate kiss.

"Thank you, Harry! I love it."

"There's an engraving on the back. Go ahead and read it."

Ginny turned the locket around and sure enough there was writing on the back. It read:

To my darling Ginny, my one and only love,

Let this locket remind you always of our love.

For all eternity, Harry

Ginny embraced him again. Harry could feel his shirt getting wet. A bit alarmed, he pulled back and gently lifted her chin with his finger. He was surprised to see she was crying.

"Gin, what's wrong," he asked her softly.

"It's so lovely, Harry," she said in his mind, "I just don't have something like this to give you."

"Don't worry your pretty little head over it, Gin," he said to her mentally as he looked into her eyes, "It doesn't matter whether you have a gift to me or not. Being with you is enough." He bent down and gave her a very passionate kiss, his tongue seeking entrance into her mouth.

She eagerly parted her lips and their tongues engaged in a battle of dominance. Their arms clung tightly to each other.

Suddenly, they heard someone clearing their throats noisily as well as some snickering. They broke apart and looked in the direction of the voices.

Standing there beside them were Hermione, Ron, Rose, Fred and George. The twins and Hermione had smirks on their faces while Ron looked like he was about to hurl.

"I thought I told you not to do that around me," Ron said.

Ginny quickly became angry, "For your information, Ronald, you weren't here when we started. It's not my lookout if you just happen to come while we're in the middle of showing each other how we feel." Her hand was inching toward her back pocket where her wand was.

Ron gulped and said, "All right, all right. I'm sorry for saying that."

Ginny glared at him before turning to Hermione, "Good morning, Hermione, Rose. Hermione, has this git greeted you yet or given you anything?"

Hermione smiled, "Yes, Ginny, he has, on both counts. He gave me a nice bouquet of roses and a large box of chocolate."

"Good," Ginny said, "I was afraid he'd forgotten what today is, though I think he may have had some help." She looked pointedly at her boyfriend/soulmate, who was looking up at the ceiling, whistling a little out of key.

Hermione put her hand on Ginny's shoulder, "That's all right, Ginny, for now. I know Ron is a bit new to this. So, what did Harry give you?"

Ginny moved away from Harry to show Hermione the locket while Harry came up to Ron and the twins.

"So," Harry said, "I guess she liked the flowers and chocolates, right?"

"Yeah," Ron said, "you heard her. Thanks for helping me get them, mate. I'll pay you back what you lent me. Thanks also for the note you left at my bedside reminding me to greet Hermione for Valentine's Day."

"Wait a minute, Ron," Fred said.

"Do you mean to say...." George said.

"That you needed Harry....,"

"..to remind you to greet.....,"

"...Hermione a Happy Valentine's day?"

Ron gulped. He shouldn't have said that in front of Fred and George. Now, he'd regret it.

"Guys, please, don't mention that to her," Ron pleaded, "I'll do anything you want."

Fred and George's eyes lit up like Christmas had come again.

"Really, Ron," they said together, "anything?"

Ron gulped again, "Well, anything within reason."

“All right,” Fred said.

“We’ll let you know,” George said.

“In the meantime, mum’s the word,” they said before walking off.

Ron wiped his brow as he sat down across from Harry.

“What have I let myself into,” he moaned, “letting them have something on me.”

Harry shook his head in sympathy and patted Ron on the arm, “I don’t know, mate. You never know with those two.”

Ginny came up to them just then, “So, shall we go down to breakfast?”

Ron looked up, his misery at being at the mercy of the twins forgotten over the mention of eating, “Yeah, let’s go.”

“You go on ahead with Hermione and Rose, Ron,” Ginny said, “I still haven’t given Harry his present.”

“You mean snogging me senseless wasn’t it?” Harry asked, “I thought it was a brilliant present.”

Ginny slapped his arm as Ron scowled, *“Stop that, Harry, at least don’t say it in front of Ron. I don’t want him souring the day anymore with his negative reactions.”*

Harry grinned but turned to Hermione and his sister, “Oh, before you girls go off to breakfast, I’ve also got something for you two.” He pulled out a couple of cards and boxes of chocolate frogs.

Hermione and Rose were both delighted and gave Harry a kiss on the cheek before leaving the common room with Ron.

Ginny sat down in Harry’s lap again and looked sternly at him, *“You know, Potter, if I wasn’t aware of how you felt about me through the Bond, I might be jealous over you giving Valentine cards to other girls, even if one of them is your sister.”*

Then her face softened, *“but, then, your thoughtfulness and caring for others is a part of you I’ve always liked. Never change that, you hear me?”* She then proceeded to kiss him again.

They broke apart after a few minutes breathing heavily again. Ginny then pulled out a package from her robes. Opening it, Harry found a copper bracelet engraved with their names intertwined together.

Harry grinned, *“This is great, Ginny. I like it a lot.”* He put it on his left hand and helped Ginny place the locket around her neck.

As they walked down to breakfast, Ginny asked Harry, *“Harry, speaking of lockets, have you gotten that locket from the first task open yet?”*

“Er, no, Gin. I haven’t. I can’t seem to find anyway to get it open.”

“But, Harry, it’s only ten days to the second task and you don’t know what you’ll be doing.”

“I know, Gin, I know. Look, let’s just enjoy the day. We’ll try the task locket again later.”

“All right, Harry. If you say so.”

After breakfast, Harry and Ginny said goodbye to the others.

As he led her out of the Great front doors, Ginny said, *“Harry, you said three weeks ago that you were going to make up to me having to spend a Hogsmeade visit with Ron and Hermione. I hope you don’t think those flowers and this locket make up for it.”*

“Oh, of course not, Gin. I’d already planned to give them to you before that day,” Harry replied, as they continued to walk outside the castle onto the grounds, *“No, I have a great day planned for us.”*

Ginny then noticed where they were headed, *“Harry, why are we headed for the Quidditch pitch?”*

“Well,” Harry replied to her, *“I know you love to fly as much as I do and we haven’t been able to do that since summer. So, I asked*

Professor Dumbledore for permission to fly for about a couple of hours within the pitch."

"Oh, Harry, that's great!" Ginny said to him as she again threw her arms around his neck and gave him a quick kiss. She then grabbed his hand and together they ran down to the pitch.

Harry stepped up to the broom shed beside the team lockers and drew out a key from his pocket. He fit it into the lock and opened the shed. Harry reached in and pulled out two brooms, his Firebolt and Ginny's Nimbus 2001 which was a Christmas present from Bill and Charlie.

They mounted the brooms and flew around the pitch a few times to get used to them. Then they drew up and hovered beside each other.

Ginny gave Harry a wicked smile, *"Let's see you try and catch me, Potter!"* She sped away before she even finished the sentence.

Harry took off after her with little hesitation. They were soon doing loops, spirals and dives that would make other people sick as they played a dizzying game of aerial tag while trying to remain within the pitch.

Finally, Harry overtook Ginny and pulled past her. He stopped at one end of the pitch and hovered a few feet above the ground. When she caught up to him, Harry leaned forward and gave her a quick kiss on the lips,

Checking his watch, Harry was surprised to find that it was half past ten.

"Gin, we better get these back in the shed," he said to her.

"Aw, Harry, do we have to?" she asked, a pout on her lips.

"I'm afraid so, Ginny. The two hours I asked Dumbledore for are almost up. Anyway, we having lunch at Madam Puddifoot's. We need to get down to Hogsmeade."

Ginny's eyes widened, "Madam Puddifoot's? That little tea shop?"
"Why did you set up our lunch there?"

"Well, I heard some of the older students saying it was a nice place to have a romantic lunch."

"Which older students were these?" Ginny asked, her eyes narrowing in suspicion, *"A couple of them wouldn't be Fred and George, would it?"*

"Uh, yeah." Harry replied, *"Actually, they're the ones who recommended it."*

Ginny slapped her forehead then shook her head, *"Harry, luv, I would have thought that after being with them all these years, you would have taken any advice, especially romantic advice, from those two with a grain of salt, in fact, a whole bag of salt."*

"Er, you mean their advice won't be good for us?"

"Duh, most definitely, Harry. Whatever advice they give may be guaranteed to embarrass us."

"But I thought they approved of our relationship."

"Harry, they may approve of it but it won't be above them to tease us and embarrass us over it. Now I know why they didn't tease us this morning when they caught us snogging."

"Just great, that was part of my 'make it up to you' plan."

Ginny could feel the disappointment coming from him and reached out to gently touch his cheek with her hand.

"That's all right, Harry," she said softly, *"I'm glad you went through all this trouble to try to make up to me for what happened three weeks ago. It really touches me that you care so much."* She then squared her shoulders and smiled, *"If you went through so much trouble, the least we can do is go there."*

Harry smiled back, *“Really, Ginny? Thanks. Come on, let’s put these brooms away.”*

They dismounted and put the brooms back in the shed. Harry locked the shed up and they walked down to the front gates.

After getting past Filch, they walked around the village for a while, visiting Zonko’s and Honeyduke’s. At twelve, they strode down to the side street where Madam Puddifoot’s was.

When they entered, they saw that it was a cramped, steamy little place. Frills and bows seemed to decorate just about everything in the shop. The tables were small and circular, many of them already occupied by couples staring into each others’ eyes.

“Harry?” Ginny said in Harry’s mind, *“you do remember I don’t like lace anymore, don’t you?”*

“Er, well, I do remember hearing you complain whenever your Mum gave you something lacy for the past three years now.”

“That’s for five years now, Harry,” Ginny said, patiently, *“I’m not sure we should go in now.”*

Just then, a very stout woman with a shiny black bun came up to them, “Hello, m’dears, I’m Madam Puddifoot, a table for two?” She smiled so sweetly that Harry couldn’t bear to refuse her.

Sighing resignedly, Ginny said as brightly as she could muster, “Yes, please.”

As Madam Puddifoot led them to a table in the corner, Ginny noticed something else.

“Harry, look at those cherubs. Are they actually doing what I think they’re doing?”

Harry looked around and saw a number of golden cherubs hovering over the tables, throwing pink confetti over the occupants.

“Uh, if you mean throwing pink confetti over the diners, then, yes, they are.”

“Oh, Merlin, you know I do not like pink!”

It seemed to be getting worse and worse. Luckily, none of the cherubs was hovering over their table.

They found that the only food and drink available in the shop was sandwiches, coffee and tea, so they ordered some ham and cheese sandwiches and tea.

“Fred and George are so dead!” Ginny grumbled.

“We can leave if you want, Gin. We don’t have to stay.”

Before Ginny could reply, they heard a familiar voice from the door, “Oh, Ron! It’s so cute!”

Harry and Ginny turned and saw Hermione standing in the door, a look of delight on her face while Ron was behind her, a look of horror on his face.

Hermione saw them and said, “Oh, look who’s here, too.” She walked over to them. Ron followed her in, looking like he wanted to hide his face.

“Hi, Harry. Hi, Ginny,” Hermione said, “I’m surprised to see you two here. I didn’t think you’d like a place like this.”

“Well, we just thought we’d see it for ourselves,” Harry said, “just to see how it looks.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, “well, we better find a table. Come on, Ron.”

Unfortunately for Harry and Ginny, Madame Puddifoot put Ron and Hermione in a table just a few feet from them.

After she and Ron had ordered, Hermione went to the bathroom.

Harry took the opportunity of Hermione’s absence to talk to Ron.

Leaning over to Ron he asked, "What are you doing here? I didn't think you'd take Hermione to a place like this?"

"Me?" Ron asked back, "What about you? I know my sister well enough to know that a place like this isn't her style."

"I'm right here, Ron," Ginny said, a bit irritated, "I don't like you talking about me like I'm not present."

Ignoring Ginny, Ron said to Harry, "Look, I was wracking my brains wondering where to take Hermione for a romantic lunch. I wasn't sure if she'd like eating at the Three Broomsticks, never mind the Hog's Head. I asked someone I thought might know Hogsmeade better."

Harry groaned inwardly, "Let me guess. You asked Fred or George, right?"

Ron's eyebrows rose up his forehead, "Yeah, I did. How did you know?"

"I made the same mistake," Harry said, "Here comes Hermione. Just act like you're enjoying being here."

Harry and Ginny's orders arrived just then. They found that the sandwiches tasted like sandpaper. They ate as fast as they could without choking on the sandwiches, all the while discussing through their mind ways of getting back at the twins.

Once they were done, they quickly stood up. Harry placed a few galleons on the table. They said goodbye to Ron and Hermione, ignoring the glare Ron was sending them for leaving them.

They headed for the Three Broomsticks where they had a bottle of butterbeer each to remove the terrible taste of the sandwiches. After that, they walked around the other stores for an hour.

"*Gin,*" Harry said to her mentally while they were looking at the candies at Honeyduke's, "*I'm really sorry about lunch. I guess that ruined the day for us.*"

Ginny couldn't stand the sadness in his mental voice, *"Harry, you don't have to apologize. We know the twins are the ones at fault here. You are just too trusting sometimes. Don't worry. There's a very simple way you can make it up to me."*

"Oh?" Harry said, *"How?"*

Instead of answering him, Ginny grabbed his hand and led him back to the castle. She brought him up to the third floor into the same passageway where they had told Rose and Hermione about the Bond a year before. They emerged an hour later a bit disheveled but much happier and satisfied.

However, as they walked to Gryffindor Tower, Harry caught a glimpse of the locket he had given Ginny earlier, which reminded him of the other locket he had to open to discover the nature of the Second task. He wondered once again how to get it open. Fortunately, he would be provided the answer to that question by Neville that very night.

Chapter 51: The Locket's clue

Disclaimer: Rose, Andrew and Daisy Potter, Maggie Longbottom and Ti Malfoy/Black are my own creations. Everything else is the work of JKR and is not being used for any personal profit.

That evening of Valentine's Day, Neville came up to Harry after dinner while he and the others were studying together in the Gryffindor common room.

"Hey, Harry," Neville said, "have you gotten that locket that was around Rose's neck during the first task opened yet?"

Harry shook his head, "No, Neville, I haven't figured out how to yet."

"I see," Neville said, "I was just wondering if you had since I think Krum has gotten his open already."

"Why do you think that he has, Neville," Ginny asked from where she was sitting beside Harry.

"Well," Neville said, "I was down by the lake earlier, looking for water plants, when I saw Krum and Propanov walking up to the shore a little ways down from where I was. Krum stripped down to a bathing suit then Propanov handed him something small that glittered in the sun and Krum went under the water. When he got out of the water a little later, he seemed very excited as he held up the glittering object. Propanov quickly wrapped a towel around him and they walked off, jabbering excitedly in Bulgarian. "

Harry thought about it and asked, "So, you think they were excited because Krum got his locket opened?"

"I think so, Harry," Neville said, "I don't think there is anything else that could have excited them other than having the tournament cup in their hands."

"Probably not," Harry said, "Now, the question is how they got it open."

“Neville,” Hermione said, “All Krum did was go into the water, right? How long was he underwater?”

“Well,” Neville said, “it seemed about ten minutes. Why?”

“Of course,” Harry cried out just then, “it’s so simple, one of us should have thought of it earlier, considering the shape of the locket.”

Neville and Ron looked at him in confusion. Ginny, Rose and Hermione, however, were smiling which meant they had also figured it out.

“Let me just get it,” Harry said.

He got up and went up to his dorm. He opened his trunk and rummaged through it for a while before finding the locket which he had placed in a small felt-lined box. He then went back down to the common room and resumed his previous seat.

“Look at its shape, Nev,” Harry said, “it’s shaped like a seashell, right? I think immersing it in water will get it open.”

Neville’s eyes widened in understanding, “So, how do we immerse it in water?”

“I don’t fancy going down to the lake since it’s still cold outside,” Harry said, “I think a loo with a deep sink or a bathtub will do. Where can we find one?”

“What about the Prefects’ bathroom?” Ginny said, turning to him, “Percy once told me that there’s a huge bathtub there. It’s on the fifth floor, a few doors to the left of this statue of a wizard named Boris the Bewildered, the one with his gloves on the wrong hands. *There’s a password, though. It was ‘pine fresh’ last year. You can try it and see if it still works.*”

“Just the thing,” Harry said, nodding his head, “I think tonight would be a good time to go there and check this locket out.”

He turned to Rose and asked quietly, “Can I borrow the Map, Rose?” They all knew he was referring to the Marauder’s Map.

"Of course, Harry," Rose said, "You don't have to ask me every time. Just let me know when you need it. Let me get it now." She got up to get it from her trunk.

"Care for some company while you're there, love?" She asked him mentally, a smirk on her face.

Harry felt himself blush as he answered her, *"Er, I don't know, Ginny. I don't want anyone to think we're doing anything wrong."*

"Oh, Harry, don't worry. I'm not ready for anything more than what we've been doing lately. I just wanted some more time just with you."

"Well, since you put it that way, meet me down here tonight at midnight. I don't think anyone else will be around then. In the meantime, let's get back to our homework so we don't waste any time."

"All right, Harry." Ginny said, smiling.

Ron looked suspiciously at them for a while before turning his attention to his homework. Rose got back by then and handed the Marauder's Map to him.

Just then, the portrait hole opened up and in stepped Fred and George, discussing something so intently that they were unaware of anything else. Before anyone could move, there were two flashes of light from beside Harry and the Weasley twins were suddenly sprouting huge green slimy bats from their noses.

The surprise was evident in their faces as they started clawing at the bat bogeys as they attacked their faces.

"You prats," Ginny screamed at them, "that'll teach you for trying to ruin this day for me and Harry."

Fred and George looked at her for a moment, eyes wide in fear, before running up to their dormitory, still covered in bat bogeys. Everyone else looked in awe at Ginny, who remained glaring at the disappearing backs of the twins.

"Whoa," Neville said, "remind me never to get you mad at me. That was some wicked curse."

"You bet it was," Harry said, looking proudly at her, "I doubt anyone can cast that hex better than her." Ginny blushed at his words.

"Still, Harry," she said to him through their Bond, "that's only a small bit of what I want to do to those two to make sure they don't do that again. Help me plan something."

"All right, Gin. I guess I do owe them for that very bad piece of advice. I bet Ron does, too. I'm sure he'll be willing help us."

"True, Harry. Go and ask him later. However, I don't think we should tell Hermione that Ron is helping us get back at them. She really loved it at Madame Puddifoot's. Ron was really brave to stay with her until she was ready to leave."

"You're right on both counts, Ginny. Now, we better get back to our homework so we can do our little excursion to a certain bathroom tonight."

Later that night, Harry made sure the rest of his dorm mates were asleep before going down to the common room, his cloak in his hand and the locket in his pocket. Ginny was down there already waiting for him, wearing a bathrobe.

Harry slipped the cloak over the two of them and they exited out of the portrait hole. They went down to the fifth floor and quickly found the prefect's bathroom. Luckily, the password Ginny had learned from Percy still worked.

When they entered it, Ginny exclaimed to Harry in his mind, *"Oh Merlin, Harry! If using this bathroom is a privilege of Prefects, it'll be worth it to be one!"*

Everything in the bathroom was made of white marble and it was softly lit by a splendid candle-filled chandelier. There was an empty rectangular swimming pool in the center of the floor with a diving board and a hundred golden taps with a different-colored jewel set in each handle around the pool's edges. The windows had long white

curtains made of linen hanging from them. In a corner was a large pile of white fluffy towels and on the wall was a large golden-framed picture which featured a mermaid with long blonde hair, sleeping at the moment on a large rock, its hair fluttering around its face when it snored.

Harry and Ginny wandered around for a few minutes, peering here and there. Eventually, they knelt down in front of some of the taps and turned on a few of them.

“Harry,” Ginny said softly, “these have different types of bubble bath, Wizarding bubble bath, mixed with water.”

Sure enough, one tap gushed pink and blue bubbles as large as footballs while another sent heavily perfumed purple clouds over the surface of the water. There was even one that poured out ice-white foam that looked thick enough to walk on.

When the pool was filled up, Ginny turned to Harry, *“Well, love, what are you waiting for? Get in the water. We can’t wait all night.”*

Harry gave her a smirk, *“All right, all right. Sheesh, women. Just turn around, okay?”*

“Sure, Harry, sure,” Ginny said, a smirk of her own on her face as she faced away from him.

Harry stripped down to some swimming trunks then slid into the water, clutching the locket. He found that his feet barely touched the bottom. He swam a couple of laps down its length, enjoying the warm water. Then he heard a soft splash behind him.

Turning around, he was surprised to see Ginny had entered the water. Not only that, but she was dressed in a one-piece swimsuit that showed her curves quite well, driving all rational thought from Harry’s mind.

He moved up to her and attacked her lips with his. He felt her smile against him but didn’t mind at all. After an indeterminate amount of time, they broke apart, breathing heavily.

"I think we should do what we came here for now, Harry," Ginny said softly.

"I guess you're right, Ginny," Harry said, "Maybe we can continue this a little later."

"Sure, Harry, sure," Ginny said, smiling.

They moved to the side of the pool.

"All right, Ginny," Harry said, "I'm going to go underwater and see if I can open the locket, okay?"

"We'll both go, Harry," Ginny said, "who knows how the clue is given."

"Okay," Harry said, "Take a deep breath now. On the count of three, we go in. One, two, three!"

They ducked under the surface of the water and opened their eyes. They looked at the locket and were surprised to see it glowing.

Before they could say anything, it popped open and golden letters came out of it and hung in the water, forming words.

Into the nearby waters deep

Descend to the lowest sand

To find the green like man's hand

Tarry not too long below for

A brew needs to be made or

Someone dear, like Beauty, will sleep

Harry and Ginny stared at the words for as long as they could hold their breaths. They surfaced and took another deep breath. They studied the words, memorizing them.

"We really should have brought some parchment," Harry reflected.

"Never mind, Harry. Between the two of us, we should be able to repeat the whole thing."

"You're probably right, Ginny. But what does it mean?"

"I'm not sure Harry," Ginny said, "We have to decipher it line by line. It may take a while to do that."

"You're right, Gin," Harry said, "Let's get out of here and back to the common room. We can write it all down there and show it to the others tomorrow. They can help us figure it out."

"Can't we stay a few more minutes, Harry," Ginny asked, sweetly, "I did promise that we could do a little more of what we were doing earlier."

Harry grinned and his lips descended on Ginny's.

When they walked back to Gryffindor Tower much later, the cloak and Map allowed them to avoid Filch. They had one bad moment when they almost ran into Snape. Luckily, they were able to hug the wall while he passed them. They reached the Fat Lady with no further incident.

Once they were in the common room, Harry wrote the clue down on a piece of parchment, remembering it word for word, with help from Ginny.

The next evening, they showed the parchment to Hermione, Rose, Ron, Ti and Neville while they were huddled in an empty classroom after dinner.

"Hmm," Hermione said, thinking deeply, "Ginny is right that we have to go over this line by line. Let's go over the first one. *'Into the nearby waters deep'*, it probably refers to a deep body of water that's near us, meaning Hogwarts."

"Well," Neville said, "the nearest deep body of water is Black Lake."

"Yeah," Harry said, "that makes sense. It's right beside the castle. It's a perfect area for one of the tasks."

"All right, that seems straight forward enough," Ron said.

"True," Hermione said, "though there are many lakes in this area, I guess it would be logical and convenient to have it as a venue."

"Then the next line probably means you have to go down to the bottom of the lake for the task," Rose said.

"That's probably right," Ginny said, "The lowest sand would be at the bottom."

"Then the third line speaks of the task itself," Hermione said, "*'find the green like man's hand'*."

"*The green like man's hand*," Ron asked, "What the bloody hell is that about?"

"Ron!" Hermione said, "Watch your language! Well, there are two ways to interpret that. It's either something that's shaped like a man's hand or functions like a hand."

"Something green may be some sort of plant," Neville said, "so maybe the champions have to find some sort of plant down there."

"That may be right," Rose said, "but what plant will they need to find?"

"Let's look at the next line," Hermione said, "It may give us a clue."

"*'Tarry not too long below for'*," Ginny read, "it just says not to stay too long in the water."

"Read it together with the next two lines," Harry suggested.

"*Tarry not too long below for a brew needs to be made or someone dear, like beauty, will sleep*," Ginny read.

"Um," Ron said, "now what does that mean?"

"Really, Ronald," Hermione said, "you really need to pay attention. Obviously, the plant or whatever it is you find in the lake is needed for a potion."

“What kind of potion?” Ti asked.

“I think it’s a potion that will keep someone from falling asleep,” Hermione said.

“Now that’s a bit barmy,” Ron said, “who wants to keep from falling asleep?”

“Well,” Hermione said, “the last line refers to someone dear like a beauty. It might refer to someone who looks beautiful to the champion.”

“Um,” Ginny said, “I don’t think that’s it, Hermione. In the message, the word ‘beauty’ started with a capital ‘B’, so it’s a name or title.”

“Wait a minute,” Rose said, “Do you think the ‘Beauty’ it refers to is Sleeping Beauty?”

“That does seem to fit, Rose” Hermione said, “It makes sense now.”

“Sleeping Beauty?” Ron asked, “Like the fairy tale?”

“Yes, Ron,” Hermione said, “You do know it, don’t you?”

Ron shrugged, “I don’t really remember the whole story, something about a girl who fell asleep for a hundred years before being awakened by a prince. “Found it kind of sappy.” This last comment earned him a glare from Ginny and a frown from the other two girls.

“That happens to be one of my favorite fairy tales, Ron,” Ginny said.

“Oh, Ron, really,” Hermione said, “In the story, a king and queen, some say they were French, angered a very powerful witch when they didn’t invite her to their daughter’s christening. The witch cursed the girl to die when she reached her twenty-first birthday. But three good witches, who were invited to the christening, changed the curse so she would only fall asleep. However, she slept for a hundred years but was awakened by a prince who defeated the evil witch.”

“So what does it have to do with the task then?” Harry asked.

“Well, I think the term ‘someone dear’ means that it’ll involve someone close to you being in danger of going to sleep like Sleeping Beauty, Hermione said, “so the task is for you and the other champions to find a plant of some sort to make a potion to prevent that.”

“You know, there’s something strange about that,” Harry said, “why do you need a potion to keep someone from falling into a sleep for a hundred years? Just how was Sleeping Beauty put to sleep?”

“Well, the Muggle version had her being pricked by a needle that put her to sleep,” Hermione said, “is there a Wizarding version that says different?” She directed this last to Ron, Ginny, Neville, Rose and Harry who had all grown up in the Wizarding world.

Ron shook his head, as did Neville.

“We can look up the details and find out,” Ginny said.

“So, in the meantime, we have to find out what plant I’ll be looking for,” Harry said.

“Well, it would have to be a plant that can be found in the lake, can awaken sleeping people and is shaped or looks like a person’s hand,” Hermione said.

“I could search through the Herbology books I have and in the library for that,” Neville said.

“That would be good, Neville,” Ginny said.

“Yeah, mate,” Harry said, “Rose can help you with that while the rest of us research on what can put you in a hundred-year sleep. She’s as good with research as Hermione.”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Rose said, “I guess I could help Neville.” She sent a glare at her brother when Neville wouldn’t notice.

“Can I help, too?” Ti asked, “I’d like to help Rose, and Neville, of course.”

“Of course, Ti,” Ginny said, smiling at him, “the more people we have looking the better.”

“All right,” Harry said, “so far, this task seems about going into Black Lake to find a plant which will somehow prevent someone close to each of the champions from going into a hundred-year sleep. So, we have two groups looking into the two parts.”

“One more thing, Harry,” Hermione said, “if you’re going to go down into the lake to search for this plant, then you’ll need a way to breathe underwater for a long time. I know you can swim and all that but I don’t think you’ll be able to hold your breath for more than 4 minutes which isn’t anywhere long enough.”

Harry sighed, “Then I guess we also have to look for a way to let me breathe underwater. Our group can do that while we look for the sleep inducing things.”

“It’s too bad we haven’t learned cross-species transfiguration yet,” Hermione said, “It would simplify things if you could turn part-fish. Of course, we won’t learn that until sixth year. I guess Fleur and Krum would know how to do that, being seventh years and all.”

“Well, never mind that, Hermione,” Harry said, “we’ll just have to find a way that doesn’t involve spells we won’t learn for another two years. Now, I just wonder who they may try to put to sleep.”

“I hate to bring this up, bro,” Rose said, “the likeliest person for you would be Ginny.”

That brought an uncomfortable feeling to the group. Harry hoped that it wouldn’t be that way. He didn’t know what he would do if Ginny fell asleep for a hundred years. With their Bond, he wouldn’t be able to stand not talking to her mentally like they have been doing for over a year now. Even if she was alive, it would feel like she was dead and that would devastate him.

Ginny felt his feelings of anxiety and despair at that prospect. She reached out, both with her hand and her mind, seeking to calm him.

“Don’t worry, Harry. I’m sure Dumbledore won’t allow that to happen. Remember the Prophecy. You’ll need me with you to get rid of old Tom.”

“I hope you’re right, Ginny. I really hope so.”

The seven Gryffindors carried out their research in between classes, meals and homework.

By Tuesday, Neville managed to find reference to a plant called the Maiden’s hand, which grew to resemble a hand with long fingers and could be found in freshwater lakes in Northern Europe. However, he couldn’t find any reference to it being used in potions or if it could be found in Black Lake.

Hermione and the others found that in the Wizarding version of Sleeping Beauty, Beauty was given a potion, which made her sleep on the day before her twenty-first birthday. However, they couldn’t find any reference to the exact potion.

On Friday, Harry got permission from Professor McGonagall for access to the Restricted Section of the Library. The whole group volunteered to join him there.

They worked there the whole day of Saturday, looking through dusty tomes. It was almost curfew when Hermione suddenly said, “I think I found something.”

“What is it, Hermione,” Harry said as he and the others turned towards her.

“I found this book on obscure potions and poisons. There’s a poison mentioned here called the *Cure to insomnia*,” Hermione.

“What does that have to do with what we’re looking for?” Ron asked.

“Ron,” Rose said, “insomnia refers to being unable to sleep. Go on, Hermione.”

“Well, this poison is supposed to put someone to sleep for a hundred years,” Hermione said, “It can be ingested or coated on something to

penetrate the skin enough to draw blood. Its effect is instantaneous if it makes contact with one's blood. However, it takes a while to take effect if it's ingested, about eight hours or so, depending on the concentration of the poison."

"All right," Harry said, "that makes it possible to counter or cure the person poisoned. Does it mention how to counter the poison, then?"

"It only says that the antidote to the poison takes four hours to brew," Hermione said, "but makes no mention of the antidote's name or components."

"Well, it's better than nothing, I guess," Ginny said.

"I guess so," Harry said. His vision was blurring from all the reading they had been doing. Looking around, he noticed that everyone was yawning already. "At least we didn't stay here for nothing today. We'd better get to bed. We can continue this tomorrow."

They all agreed and shuffled back to Gryffindor Tower for a good night's sleep. They spent the whole Sunday doing the same thing but had no further success.

Monday found them back at class. Harry was sitting down in the Dungeons for Potions when a balled up piece of parchment hit his desk. He looked around but could not see anyone who looked like they had thrown it at him. Keeping an eye out for Snape, he opened the ball. Inside was a note:

Potter,

I need to speak with you. It's important. Lag behind after Potions and I'll meet you outside the classroom. Do not tell anyone, especially Granger and Weasley. Don't worry, if I intended to ambush you, I wouldn't have provided this warning.

Draco Malfoy

"Now what could that git want?" Ginny said suddenly in his mind, causing Harry to jump.

“Gin, don’t do that,” Harry said, “next time, let me feel your presence before you speak. People will think I’m barmy, jumping up suddenly with no visible reason.”

“Sorry, love,” Ginny said, though Harry could feel her amusement.

“Never mind. I guess we’ll see what this is about later. Now, let me pay attention. Snape just came in.”

“All right, Harry. I’ll see you later.”

At the end of the class period, Harry pretended to take time cleaning his cauldron. He told Ron and Hermione to go ahead. His friends looked suspiciously at him for a moment before leaving.

When Harry exited the Potions classroom, he heard someone whisper his name from his left. Malfoy beckoned to him from behind one of the suits of armor. Harry walked over to him and found that the suit hid an alcove where two people could talk and not be heard or noticed.

“All right, Malfoy,” Harry said, quietly, “what’s so important you needed to meet with me secretly?”

Malfoy scowled at him, “Look, Potter, I really didn’t have to do this, but call it repayment for saving my brother’s life.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, “Okay, Malfoy, I’m listening.”

Malfoy took a deep breath before he started, “I have to warn you. I know the second task for the Triwizard Tournament is in two days.”

“Everyone knows that, Malfoy,” Harry said. That had been announced at the beginning of the term when the students had gotten back from the Christmas holidays.

“Yes, yes,” Malfoy said, “I know that, Potter. However, I have heard that it will take place in the lake. I’m not sure what the task will be but the thing is there will be another attempt to kill you during the event. I’ve been led to believe that it’ll involve the giant squid.”

Harry felt a wave of dread and shock from Ginny but ignored it for now.

"How do you know this, Draco?" Harry asked Malfoy. If the blonde was surprised by Harry's use of his given name, he didn't show it.

"I have my sources, Potter," Malfoy said, "I know from them that the Dark Lord wasn't happy the dragon failed to get you. Because of that, he's ordered another try during the second task. So, you'd better be ready to handle a giant squid, Potter, and fast."

Malfoy then turned around and left without another word. Harry waited a few seconds before following.

"Harry?" he heard Ginny in his mind, *"now I'm really scared. How will you fight a giant squid in the water?"*

"I don't know yet, Ginny. We just had another thing added to our research list. Maybe Hermione has a few suggestions. Don't worry, love, I'm not going to let a giant piece of calamari snuff me, not while I can help it."

"You have to tell Dumbledore, Harry, and your father. They can help you," Ginny said.

"All right, Gin," Harry said, *"I'll send Hedwig to Potter Manor tonight."*

After writing a letter to his dad and sending Hedwig off with it, Harry talked to Professor Dumbledore. Dumbledore thanked Harry for the information and assured him that the giant squid, whose name Dumbledore said was Edgar, would be watched to prevent anyone from casting any spells on him.

"That's really weird," Ginny said to Harry later as they continued their search in the library, *"I never thought the Giant Squid had a name. It's such a common name, too."*

Harry shrugged, *"Well, Dumbledore said it was the Squid himself who told him his name. I'm a bit surprised it was able to talk with the Professor."*

“Well, stranger things have happened in the Magical World, Harry. Like this Bond we have, I bet Muggles would scratch their heads over what we’re doing.”

“Too true, Ginny,” Harry said, “Anyway, we’d better get back to our search.”

Harry only told Hermione and Ron about Malfoy’s warning. He didn’t want to worry the others, especially his sister. Hermione found some useful spells Harry could use underwater for defense. Hopefully, it would affect the giant squid.

They were still reading when Madame Pince made them leave the Restricted Section on Tuesday night. Harry and Ginny managed to sneak some books past the librarian, much to Hermione’s disgust.

Harry continued reading in bed late into the night, still looking for a way to breathe underwater. He dozed lightly but when he awakened, he saw that it was still dark. He felt for Ginny’s presence and sensed that she was still asleep. Unable to sleep further, he decided to read down in the common room.

When he got there, he was surprised to see someone with dark red hair sleeping in front of the fire. He got closer and saw who it was.

“Rose,” he said as he started shaking his sister awake, “come on, sprite, wake up.”

“Harry?” she asked, still groggy.

“Yes, sis, it’s me. What are you doing down here?” Harry asked her.

He was surprised when Rose suddenly hugged him tightly and started to cry.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” he asked as he struggled to pull away, “what’s got you in a tizzy over?”

Rose looked up at him, tears flowing unheeded down her cheeks, “Harry, I-I-I had a vision last night, actually it was more like a dream.”

“What was it about?” Harry asked, concerned.

“I saw you in deep water, with gills on the side of your neck and webbed feet and hands. You were looking for something. You found a plant shaped like a hand and pulled out of the ground. You started rising to the surface when several Grindylows attacked you. You managed to drive some of them back but they were swarming you. Then a giant tentacle wrapped itself around you and started squeezing the life out of you. That’s when I woke up. I was so scared that I came down here to calm down. I must have fallen asleep while deciding whether to tell you or not. I even thought of sending an owl to Dad.”

Harry let Rose talk without interruption. When she seemed finished, Harry asked, “Do you think it was a regular dream or some sort of vision of the future?”

“I-I-I’m not sure, Harry,” she said, “In my readings on Seers, it seems some Seers see visions like that in their sleep, others don’t. This is the first time I had such a dream.”

“All right, Rose,” Harry said, “Don’t worry about it. I’ve already received a warning about the giant squid being used to attack me during the task.” He held up his hand to prevent her from interrupting him.

“I’ve told Dumbledore and sent an owl to Dad. Dumbledore’s told me he’d take care of it. So there’s nothing we can do but wait. So, don’t think about it, okay?”

Rose looked uncertainly at him, “Okay, Harry. At least, you’re warned about it.”

“Now,” Harry said to her, “you go back to bed. It’s still a couple of hours to dawn. I can’t sleep anymore. I’ll just be down here, reading some more.”

Rose nodded her head and headed back to her dorm. As he watched her disappear up the steps, Harry hoped her vision wouldn’t come true. However, he knew that was a forlorn hope if he had to base it on his experience with her visions over the past year.

Harry squared his shoulders and turned his attention to the book in front of him. It seemed to have more information on the 'Cure to Insomnia' poison Hermione had mentioned. Harry hoped it would help him with the task he would have to do in only four and a half hours.

Chapter 52: The Second Task

Disclaimer: Rose, Andrew and Daisy Potter, Maggie Longbottom and Ti Malfoy/Black are my own creations. Everything else is the work of JKR and is not being used for any personal profit.

After making Rose go back to bed, Harry read for only another hour before deciding to get some early breakfast while the majority of the students population was still in their dorms. He changed into his swimming trunks and placed his robes over them.

When he arrived in the Great Hall, there were only about a half dozen students inside but they watched Harry walk inside and take a seat at the Gryffindor table. Harry felt his stomach churn as his mind turned to the task he was going to go through in a few hours especially since he still didn't know how to breathe underwater for more than a few minutes. Now unable to eat, he simply stared at the food.

After an hour of staring at the food, he became aware of Ginny stirring from her sleep.

"Harry? Are you awake already," she asked through their Bond.

"Uh, yes, Gin," he answered her in the same way.

She became aware of where he was and what he was feeling, *"I'll be there in a few minutes, Harry. Don't you dare go anywhere without me."*

She arrived ten minutes later, which was an evident indication of her concern. Sitting beside Harry, she took his hand in both of hers and squeezed it gently as she sent calming thoughts to him. Finally, when he was calmer, she said, "All right, sweetie, you should eat something now."

She proceeded to pile food on his plate then looked expectantly at him. Harry took a deep breath and started eating. Ginny smiled and started on her own breakfast.

Ron and Hermione came in a few minutes later and sat across from them.

"Thank goodness the food's here," Ron said, "I'm starving and thirsty." He reached over and grabbed a glass full of pumpkin juice, drinking deeply from it.

"Ron," Ginny exclaimed, "That's my juice. Get you own."

"But it was already filled," Ron said, as he placed the glass down. He then started to pile food on his own plate. After a minute or two, he yawned, with his mouth full.

"Ron!" Hermione admonished, "Swallow first before you do that, it's gross."

Suddenly, Ron's head thumped onto the table and he went limp.

"Ron, honestly," Hermione said, as she started shaking his shoulder, "you've had enough sleep. Wake up!" Her shaking grew more violent as Ron failed to stir.

Finally, Hermione drew her wand and said, "*Ennervate!*" When Ron didn't respond, she gave a panicked look at Harry and Ginny.

Harry felt alarm course through his body. He took the glass from which Ron had drunk and sniffed it. It smelled like pumpkin juice. He was about to take a taste when he heard Dumbledore's voice unexpectedly say, "Stop, Harry! Don't drink that."

Harry and the others turned to the Headmaster, who was walking toward them, "Why not, Professor? What's wrong with it?" He had an idea why Dumbledore had stopped him but wanted it confirmed.

"I'm afraid that it is probably poisoned. It appears that Mr. Weasley is now part of the second task."

Harry paled, "He's now my 'someone dear' who is in danger of sleeping like Sleeping Beauty. But it was Ginny's glass that he drunk from. She was the one who was supposed to fall asleep."

"I'm afraid so, Harry," Dumbledore said, his voice grave, "I'm sorry for this but this task is Ludo's idea and Barty supported it fully."

“Sir,” Hermione said, “isn’t it dangerous to give someone this poison. What if one of the champions fails to bring back the plant for the antidote? He’ll sleep for a hundred years!”

“I don’t think it will come to that, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said, “but rest assured, we are prepared for that possibility. Now, it would be best if we move Mr. Weasley to the hospital wing.”

Dumbledore conjured a stretcher then levitated Ron onto it. Harry, Hermione and Ginny followed Dumbledore as he guided the stretcher toward the Great Hall’s doors.

Just as they reached the doors, they opened and Rose and Ti came through them. Their eyes widened when they saw Ron on the stretcher with Dumbledore, Harry, Ginny and Hermione accompanying him.

“H-Harry,” Rose said, “What happened to Ron?”

Harry frowned, “He’s been poisoned, Rose, with the “Cure to Insomnia” poison. This makes him the one I’m supposed to get the Maiden’s Hand for.”

“Then it wasn’t Ginny who was chosen,” Ti said.

“Er, actually, Ti,” Hermione said, “The poison was in Ginny’s goblet but Ron drank from it before she could.”

“Where are you taking him?” Rose asked.

“The Headmaster thinks it would be better for Ron to be in the hospital wing now,” Ginny answered.

“We had better go,” Dumbledore said, “We need to settle Ron in the hospital wing before the task starts.”

When they reached the Entrance Hall, they saw Neville hurrying toward them through the front doors.

“What happened to Ron?” he asked them.

Hermione quickly explained what had happened earlier to Ron.

“Oh boy,” Neville said, “That really awful. Uh, Harry, can I talk to you for a moment, in private?”

“Uh, sure, Neville,” Harry said, “You guys go on ahead to the hospital wing. We’ll catch up.”

They moved to a corner of the Hall, across from the broom cupboard.

“What is it, Neville?” Harry asked.

“I’ve found a way for you to breathe underwater,” Neville said, “Here, take this.” He pressed a mass of what looked like slimy grayish green rat tails into Harry’s hand.

“What are these, Neville?” Harry asked.

“It’s Gillyweed, Harry,” Neville said, “It causes gills to sprout at the sides of the neck and hands and feet to become webbed once you’ve swallowed it. It’ll allow you to breathe underwater for about an hour. That should be enough time to find some Maiden’s Hand. Remember, the Maiden’s hand is greenish, translucent and is shaped like a long-fingered hand. It grows in the bottom, near the middle within forests of seagrass. Just watch out for Grindylows.”

Grindylows were small, horned water demons that hid in the weeds and attacked swimmers, trying to drown them so they could eat them. Harry had learned about them the previous year from Remus’ Defense Against the Dark Arts class.

“Thanks, Neville,” Harry said, “I’ll try to remember all that. Well, we better catch up to the others. I want to make sure Ron is settled in the hospital wing before going down to the lake.”

When Harry and Neville arrived at the hospital wing, they saw that Ron had already been placed in one of the beds at the side of the room. However, he was not the only one who had been poisoned for the task and the wing was crowded with people.

Madame Maxime was hovering over another bed where a girl with dark brown hair and wearing Beauxbatons robes lay, apparently asleep. Fleur was seated beside the unconscious girl, holding her hand. Two other Beauxbatons students, one boy and one girl were standing behind Fleur, looking grave.

On another bed was a boy dressed in Durmstrang furs. Viktor Krum was seated beside the boy, his face sour and glum. Propanov was off to the side, talking with Dumbledore.

Occasionally, Viktor would glance in Hermione's direction but she didn't notice since she was too focused on Ron, causing the older boy to frown. Hermione had been polite with Krum since she started dating Ron but didn't talk to him as much as she used to.

Both Fleur and Viktor were wearing bathrobes. Their swimming wear was probably under the robes.

As he gazed at the sleeping victims, Harry was a bit glad that he wasn't the one in bed, though he felt guilty having that feeling since it was Ron who was sick and he was that way because of the task.

"Harry," Ginny's mental voice broke into his thoughts, "you have nothing to feel guilty over. It's not your fault. Ron shouldn't have taken a drink from my glass in the first place. But the one really responsible is the one who entered your name in the tournament." She was with Hermione, Rose and Ti, seated around Ron.

Harry sighed and walked over to them with Neville. *"You're right, Gin,"* Harry said to her, mentally, *"It's just that I feel like I'm a puppet being controlled. I feel so helpless seeing Ron like this. I really want to find out who placed me in this bloody tournament."*

"Don't think about that, Harry. The best thing you can do right now is go out there and find that plant."

"All right," Harry said, *"that's what I'm going to do. Uh, Ginny, who are the two other victims?"*

"Oh, the one with Fleur is Marie Jeconais, her best friend while the one with Viktor is Igor Stratislav, his best friend," Ginny said,

“Apparently, both were poisoned like Ron while having breakfast. Both headmasters were not pleased, especially Propanov.”

“I know how they feel,” Harry said.

Ginny took his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, “it’ll be all right, Harry. I’m sure you’ll find the Maiden’s Hand in time.”

Just then, Dumbledore came up to Harry, trailed by Madame Maxime, Fleur, Propanov and Viktor Krum.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said, “It’s time to head down to the lake for the task. Don’t worry; by the end of the task, there should be enough time for the antidote to be brewed.”

“All right, Professor,” Harry said, “if you say so.”

He nodded to Fleur and Viktor, “Don’t worry. We’ll get our friends out of this.”

Both looked at Harry with gratitude.

“Thank you, ‘arry,” Fleur said, her eyes wet with unshed tears, “Marie ‘az been my best friend zinz we started at Beauxbatons. I do not know ‘ow I will go on wiz’out ‘er.”

“Da,” Viktor said, “Igor is being like zat for me, also.”

Ginny gave Harry a peck on the cheek before he left the hospital wing. The three champions walked in silence, side by side down to the lake, trailed by their respective headmasters/mistress.

When they were able to see the lake, they saw that there was a gold-draped table near the water’s edge and seated there were Ludo Bagman and Barty Crouch. On the opposite bank of the lake, stands were erected with the seats from around the dragon’s enclosure. Students were already filling them.

When they arrived at the lakeshore, Harry, Fleur and Viktor glared at Bagman and Crouch. Dumbledore, Propanov and Madam Maxime took their seats at the table.

“Er, good morning,” Bagman said, nervously as he noted the hostile looks being given to him by the three champions, “I hope you’ve, ah, all figured out what you have to do.”

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said, in a sarcastic tone, “it’s a great task you’re having us do. Find a plant underwater to save our best mates from sleeping for a hundred years. Great, wonderful, right up with that first task where we saved a loved one from a mad dragon. Just who cursed you with the brains of a monkey, Voldemort?”

Bagman winced, “N-n-now, Harry, there’s no need to bring You-Know-Who into this. This has nothing to do with him. After all, he’s gone and all thanks to you.”

Harry noticed a look of anger on Crouch’s face but it was gone before he could focus on it.

“Now,” Bagman continued, “we just have a few minutes while we wait for the stands to fill.”

While they were waiting, Harry gestured to Fleur and Viktor to come closer to him. When they did, he said in a low voice, “Look, it’ll be better if we work together on this. At least, we should cooperate in searching for the Maiden’s Hand. That way, we can find it quickly.”

The two were silent for a few seconds before Viktor said, “I agree with Harry. We must work together so finding this plant will be easy.”

Fleur nodded, “Oui, we must, so our friends may wake up.”

“All right,” Harry said, “when we get into the water, we have to split up to search as much of the lake as we can. From our research, my friends and I have determined that all we need to do is look for clumps of seagrass. They look like a thick carpet of light green weeds about two feet high. The Maiden’s Hand grows among the seagrass.”

“So, we will look for these plants at the bottom of the lake?” Viktor asked.

“Yes,” Harry said, “each of us should search each clump we find. Several strands of Maiden’s Hand usually grow together. So, if we

find one, there should be enough for all of us. After all, we only need one strand for each potion.”

“Very vell, Harry,” Viktor said, “How vill ve contact each other once someone finds it?”

“Well, we can’t use red sparks in the water,” Harry said, thinking, “I know, flash the light from your wand at maximum power on and off in quick succession five times. It should be visible for a mile or two.”

“Yes,” Fleur said, “zat should work.”

Viktor nodded, “Yes, very vell. Ve vill do that.”

“All right,” Harry said, “if you find one first, just make sure the others see where it is before leaving, okay? Oh, watch out for Grindylows. They hide in the seagrass.”

Both Fleur and Viktor nodded. Bagman called them to change and come up to the water’s edge.

When the three champions, now in swimsuits, were standing, Bagman pointed his wand to his throat and said, “*Sonorus!*” His voice, now magically magnified, boomed out over the water, “Good morning! Our champions are now ready for the second task, which will start at my whistle. They will have one hour to search for the plant, which is the main reagent for the potion that will awaken their sleeping friends. On the count of three, then. One.....two.....*three!*”

The three champions walked into the cold waters of the lake. Fleur and Viktor cast spells on themselves then dove under the water.

Harry stuffed the Gillyweed into his mouth and chewed. He gagged a bit on the awful taste but managed to swallow them. As he walked further into the water, he suddenly felt as if someone had clamped a pillow over his mouth and nose and a piercing pain appeared on the sides of his neck. His head started spinning from lack of air.

“*Harry! Get under the water now!*” he heard Ginny say to him in his mind.

Harry dove under the water and took a gulp of water. The spinning feeling immediately disappeared and he felt the water pass through the gills he now had. Looking at his hands and feet, he saw webbing between his fingers and toes. His feet had also elongated a bit.

Grinning, Harry dove deep into the murky depths, enjoying the now warmer water. He could only see about ten feet in front of him. He glided through the water, heading for the bottom of the lake.

After several minutes, a landscape unlike any he had seen before loomed before him. Forests of rippling, tangled black weed and wide plains of mud littered with dull, glimmering stones were all about. Harry turned toward where he thought the middle of the lake was. So far, there was no sign of the other champions, Grindylows or, thankfully, the giant squid.

Harry then spotted a clump of seagrass. He dove down to it and started shifting through the weeds. He didn't see any other plant. Then, he felt a heavy pressure around his left leg. Looking down, he saw a Grindylow clutching his leg with its long fingers and baring its pointed teeth at him. More were starting to rise from the weeds.

Harry pulled his wand out of his swimming trunk's back pocket and shouted, "*Relashio!*" Instead of sound, a large bubble came out of his mouth and instead of red sparks, a jet of what appeared to be hot water came out of his wand and hit the Grindylow, causing red welts to appear on its skin and forcing it to let go.

Harry repeated the spell several more times, forcing the Grindylows to return to the shelter of the weeds. Harry then moved away, looking for other clumps of seagrass.

After twenty more minutes and several clumps of seagrass, Harry surmised that he was near the middle of the lake. He found another clump of seagrass and spotted a group of translucent green plants whose leaves were thin and elongated.

That must be the Maiden's Hand Harry thought. He swam up to it. After ascertaining that it was indeed the Maiden's Hand, he raised his wand and said, "*Lumos maxima!*"

A very bright light came out of his wand's tip. After a second, he said, "Nox!", extinguishing the light. He relit his wand two more times with an interval of a second.

Hoping Fleur and Viktor had seen the light, he reached down, plucked one strand of the plant and placed it in the front pocket of his trunks. Then he waited.

While he was waiting, Harry saw several humanoid figures with silvery fishtails instead of legs swim up to the edge of the seagrass clump. *Merpeople!* They had grayish skin, long wild hair of a dark green color and yellow eyes. Around their necks, they wore thick ropes of pebbles and had spears in their hands. They appeared to be watching him.

After about a minute, one of them pointed to the Maiden's hand then at Harry then made a shooing gesture. Harry shook his head.

The same merman came closer and said, "You have the plant. You should go."

"I'm waiting for the others to find it," Harry tried to say but only bubbles came out of his mouth. He shook his head again and continued watching for the other champions.

The merman shrugged his shoulders and joined the others. The merpeople took one last look at Harry and swam off.

A few minutes later, Harry saw a slim figure coming towards him. It was Fleur and she had an enormous bubble around her head, making her features appear wide and lopsided.

Harry pointed out the strand of Maiden's Hand to her. She smiled and nodded her thanks before diving down toward the plant. Harry looked around for Viktor but saw no sign of him. Deciding that he had waited long enough, he turned for one last look at Fleur but froze at what he saw.

Several Grindylow were mobbing Fleur, tugging her and pulling her down toward the seagrass. With barely a thought, Harry dove toward the part-Veela girl.

When he got close to her, he sent several jets of hot water at the nasty creatures, while trying to avoid hitting Fleur. The Grindylows fled before Harry's spells. Harry pulled Fleur away from them.

Luckily, she was unharmed. Shaking a bit, she nodded her thanks again to Harry and headed for the surface, a strand of Maiden's Hand clutched tightly in one hand.

Harry watched her ascend for a few seconds. Then he felt a tug on his leg and looked down. Another Grindylow was clutching his foot. Suddenly, the creature bit him. Harry gasped at the sharp pain the bite caused him.

He lashed out with his other foot, hard and felt it connect with its horned skull. The Grindylow let go and floated away, clearly dazed. Harry saw more of the creatures rising out of the seagrass. He drew his wand and sent more jets of hot water at them, forcing some of them back.

However, more came out of the seagrass and started swarming his legs, pulling him down. Some of them started biting him, drawing blood.

It's just like Rose's vision.

He could feel himself sinking down into the seagrass. The loss of blood from his wounds was starting to make him light-headed and a bit dizzy.

"Harry! Don't give up!" He heard Ginny call to him in his mind. He could feel her panic mounting. Dimly, he was aware of Hermione and Rose holding her, to keep her from jumping into the water after him.

Harry could barely hold his wand up. Several Grindylows were also clutching his arms, keeping him from casting the spell. His vision started to grow dim.

Suddenly, a large shadow seemed to block out the light from the surface. Then, something long and sinewy with suction cups wrapped itself around his waist.

Great! He thought Now, Edgar's getting in on the action.

As he hovered on the edge of consciousness, he noticed that the Grindylows seemed to be letting him go. He then felt himself rising and realized that the giant squid had somehow driven the Grindylows off and was actually lifting him toward the surface of the lake.

As he was being pushed upward, Harry shook his head, trying to clear it. Then he felt a pair of hands grasp his arms and pull him further upward. Turning his head, he momentarily panicked at the sight of the creature grasping him.

It appeared to be a human body in swimming trunks with the head of a shark. He realized that it was Viktor, who seemed to have Transfigured himself, a bit badly.

Viktor gave him a look that seemed to be asking if he was all right. Harry looked up and saw that they were close to the surface and gave Viktor a thumbs-up sign. Viktor nodded as he let Harry go then he started rising toward the surface, a strand of Maiden's Hair tucked into his trunks. There was no sign of the giant squid.

Harry pushed himself upward with his feet. He noticed he was starting to have difficulty drawing in his breath and there was pain again at the sides of his neck. He was starting to get dizzy again and water was flooding through his mouth into his lungs.

Oh, no, the Gillyweed must be wearing off.

He dimly heard Ginny in his mind giving him encouragement as he struggled upward and tried not to lose consciousness

Suddenly, he broke the surface of the lake and drew in a great breath of air. As his head started to clear, he found that he was more than a hundred yards from shore. He allowed himself to float as he got his breathing under control. Finally, he headed for shore, using strong strokes to move quickly through the water, ignoring his aching muscles.

When he felt his feet come in contact with solid ground, he started moving faster. Harry fell to his knees when he broke free of the water,

gasping from exhaustion. Ginny was at his side in a flash, draping a towel over him. Hermione and Rose helped him stand up.

"Harry," Ginny said in his mind as she hugged him tightly, *"I swear, if you had given up back there, I would have hexed you into next week."*

"Don't worry, love. I'm okay now." Harry said back to her as he returned her embrace.

"No, you're not, you prat!" Ginny said, *"You're bleeding from all those Grindylow bites. Come on, Harry, let's get you to Madame Pomfrey."*

Reluctant to argue with her, Harry allowed her to pull him over to where the school nurse was examining Fleur and Viktor. Madame Pomfrey pursed her lips when she saw the wounds on Harry's legs.

"Sit down, Potter," she said, "I have to heal those wounds before they get worse."

Harry sat down on a stool and allowed the matron to heal the Grindylow bites on his legs. He saw Dumbledore at the water's edge, talking to several of the merpeople. Then, the headmaster walked back to the judges' table and talked with the others.

Snape came up to him then.

"Potter," the greasy-haired professor said, holding his hand out, "I'll have your strand of Maiden's Hair now so I can begin brewing the antidote for Weasley." Harry reluctantly handed over the plant to Snape, who walked off back toward the castle.

Fleur then came up to Harry and hugged him, earning a scowl from Ginny. The French girl said, "Oh, 'arry. Thank you so much for saving me from the Grindylows. Those 'orrible creatures, they almost drowned me!" She gave him a kiss on each cheek, causing Harry to blush and Ginny to glower at the Beauxbatons girl.

Harry turned to Viktor, "Thanks for helping me back there, Viktor," Harry said, "I'm not sure what would have happened if you hadn't come along."

"You are welcome, Harry," Viktor said, smiling a little, "Of course, I thought the giant squid was attacking you but I saw it drive the Grindylows away from you."

"I thought that was what it was doing," Harry said, "I guess I owe it my thanks also."

Just then, James and Lily came up to them. They quickly hugged Harry.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Lily asked as she looked him over.

"I'm all right now, Mum," Harry said, "I had a few Grindylow bites but Madame Pomfrey healed them all up."

"That's good, son," James said, "It's just too bad you were third getting back. Oh, Ludo is about to announce the scores." They turned toward the judges as Bagman pointed his wand to himself and said, "*Sonus!*"

"Your attention, please, ladies and gentlemen," Bagman said with his amplified voice, "we, the judges, have come to our decision based on our observations and some testimony from the merpeople who live in the lake. We have decided to award points out of fifty to our champions as follows..."

"Miss Fleur Delacour made excellent use of the Bubblehead Charm and was the first one back with the correct plant, even though she was attacked by Grindylows. We award her forty-eight points."

The crowd applauded and cheered enthusiastically.

"Mr. Viktor Krum performed an incomplete crossspecies Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective and was the second one to return. He receives forty-four points."

More applause and cheers came from the stands.

"Finally, Mr. Harry Potter made excellent use of Gillyweed and came back last. However, we have been informed by the merpeople who were watching, that he was the first to find a clump of Maiden's Hand

but refused to leave until he was sure the others could find it. In addition, he came to the aid of Miss Delacour when she was attacked by the Grindylows. We applaud him for his moral fiber and courage. Therefore, we award him with forty-six points.”

Cheers and applause broke out from the stands, louder than they had been for Viktor and Fleur. Adding up his previous score from the first task put Harry in first place.

“Well done to all the champions,” Bagman continued, “Now, we are up to the third and final task. It’ll take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June. The champions will be informed of the task, exactly one month beforehand. Thank you for your support of all the champions. *Quietus!*”

Harry grinned as Hermione, Rose and his parents congratulated him. Ginny leaped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist, and gave him a passionate kiss, much to the amusement of Harry’s parents, sister, best friend and Dumbledore. This, however, bewildered Fleur, Viktor and the other judges.

Harry and Ginny broke apart then their cheeks reddened as they realized that they had an audience.

“Er, sorry,” Ginny said, “I just got carried away, what with Harry now in first place.”

“Oh, that’s perfectly all right, Miss Weasley,” Dumbledore said, the familiar twinkle in his eye, “It’s so nice to see young love like that. I remember a certain other young couple years ago, another redhead girl and a black-haired bespectacled boy. She congratulated him in the same way after they won the Quidditch Cup in their final year. They were just as in love as the two of you are, and still are, I believe.”

James and Lily’s cheeks turned red on hearing Dumbledore’s comment.

Dumbledore chuckled, “All right, I think we should head to the hospital wing now. We have a trio of people to awaken.”

Everyone nodded and started to head for the castle.

Ginny helped Harry dry off with a drying charm then held his robe as he put them on. They then headed up the path to the castle, holding hands.

As they walked, Harry noticed his dad was lagging behind, looking at something suspiciously. Harry followed his Dad's gaze and saw that his father was watching Mr. Crouch, who was talking to Propanov as they walked up to the castle.

"Dad," Harry said, "What is it? Why are you looking at Mr. Crouch like that?"

"Huh," James said as he turned his attention to his son, "What do you mean, son?"

"Dad, you've got that look," Harry said, "You know, your 'suspicious Auror' look. What's going on?"

James sighed, "Mr. Crouch seems to be acting strangely lately. He seems obsessed with this tournament. I heard from Percy that he's arrived late at several important meetings in the last three months, meetings not concerned with this tournament. It's really strange since he's always been punctual. Then, he's gone home early often lately, leaving a lot of work undone. It's as if he's not interested in most parts of his job anymore."

"That is strange, Dad," Harry said, "you know, this morning, I got kind of angry at him and Bagman for putting Ron to sleep and told them they must have been cursed by Voldemort into coming up with these tasks. Bagman reacted the usual way people do on hearing old Voldie's name, but Mr. Crouch actually looked angry for a moment when Bagman mentioned that he was gone, thanks to me."

"That is a bit unusual, son," James said, "Even I occasionally get chills when I hear V-V-Voldemort's name. Of course, it might have to do with what happened to his son, Barty, Jr."

"Why, James?" Ginny asked, as she was walking beside them, "What happened to his son?"

“Well, after V-V-Voldemort disappeared after attacking us, some Death eaters captured the Longbottoms to get information on Voldemort’s whereabouts. Luckily for Frank and Alice, they were caught by Moody and some other Aurors before they got cursed for too long with the Cruciatus curse. Merlin knows what would have happened to them otherwise. Anyway, one of the Death eaters caught was Barty’s own son, Barty Crouch, Jr.”

Harry and Ginny’s eyes widened.

“What did Mr. Crouch do?” Harry asked, a bit afraid of the answer.

James gave a bitter laugh, something Harry had never heard from his father, “Barty was head of Magical Law Enforcement and chief judge when his son came to trial. The boy vehemently denied the charges and frantically begged his mother, who was present, to save him. Barty refused to listen to his own son and sentenced him to Azkaban with no regrets, even disowned him.”

“That’s horrible,” Ginny said, “What happened after that?”

James sighed, “Barty Jr died in Azkaban a couple of years later. Barty’s wife never recovered from the shock. She died a few months after her son. Barty was a broken man after that. He was in line for Minister of Magic but his prestige suffered a nosedive after his son’s trial and he got shunted into the Department of Magical Cooperation. Of course, he worked just as hard in that department as he did in his old job. But now, he seems a bit different.”

After a few seconds of watching Mr. Crouch, James shook his head, as if he was trying to clear it, “Well, never mind about Crouch. Let’s catch up with the others. You have a friend to awaken and need to celebrate a successful task.” He then increased his stride to catch up with his wife and daughter.

Harry and Ginny looked at each other but decided to leave the matter alone for now. They hurried to catch up with James, eager to be there when Ron woke up.

Chapter 53: House-elves and sisters

Disclaimer: Rose, Andrew and Daisy Potter, Maggie Longbottom and Ti Malfoy/Black are my own creations. Everything else is the work of JKR and is not being used for any personal profit.

A/N: Here's the next chapter. I'm sorry for taking longer than usual, but I've been busy lately and couldn't find time to write. Anyway, thanks to all those who have been reviewing this fic. It really is great to read all your comments. I'm sorry that I haven't been able to reply personally like I used to do. Oh, by the way, this story is also up on for those who are interested, under my pseudonym there, pottervader. My beta on that site modified a bit of the wording, but it's still the same story. Anyway, enjoy. Please R&R.

James and Lily said their farewells to their children and their friends when they got back to the castle, as they were anxious to get back to Andrew and Daisy whom they had left with Molly. In addition, they wanted to tell Molly what had happened in the task.

Harry, Ginny, Hermione and Rose barely touched their food during lunch in the Great Hall, anxious as they were for Snape to have finished the antidote to the 'Cure to Insomnia' poison. They saw that Fleur and Viktor were looking equally anxious. The four Gryffindors returned to their common room when they couldn't eat.

Just before three in the afternoon, about four hours after the end of the task, Professor McGonagall came into the common room to inform Harry and Ginny that the antidote was ready. Ti, Neville and Neville's sister, Maggie, joined them, Hermione and Rose as the four headed for the hospital wing.

Bagman and the three headmasters were already there along with Fleur and Victor, who were waiting their own friends to be revived. Harry and his friends held their breaths as Madam Pomfrey gave Ron the antidote.

When he awoke, Ron had a confused look on his face as he noticed where he was and the anxious looks on his friends' faces. Then he said that he seemed to have had the most peaceful sleep in his entire

life, which earned him exasperated looks from the girls and amused ones from Harry and Neville.

Of course, when he learned what had been done to him, to say that he was angry would be a gross understatement. Harry and Neville had to hold him back as he tried to get up, looking for his wand and threatening to hex Bagman. Ron was even more furious when he learned he had missed lunch.

At the mention of lunch, Harry and the others realized that they were as hungry as Ron, now that the redhead was up and about. Since classes had been cancelled for the day, Harry suggested they go down to the kitchen and ask the house elves for some food, a suggestion everyone agreed to, though Hermione was reluctant.

Unfortunately, before Ron could get out of bed, the doors of the hospital wing banged open and his mother walked in. When she caught sight of Ron, she hurried over to his side.

"Ron, are you all right," Molly asked her youngest son as she hugged him tightly.

"Geroff, Mum," Ron said, his voice muffled, "I'm fine, Mum. I'm just hungry. I can't believe I missed lunch."

"Ronald Bilius Weasley! How can you think about lunch when you're recovering from being poisoned?" Molly asked, exasperated.

"Now, Molly," Dumbledore said to the Weasley matriarch, "calm down. As you can see, he is fine. The poison actually has no side effects once the one...involved...wakes up." He deliberately avoided saying the word 'poisoned' which would have set off Molly.

"How could you let this happen, Albus?" Molly asked Dumbledore, "Letting students be poisoned, really!"

"I'm afraid the Ministry insisted on having it this way, Molly," Dumbledore said, "It was the suggestion of the representative from the Department of Magical Sports."

“The representative of the Department of Magical Sports,” Molly asked, confused. Then she saw Bagman who was now fidgeting anxiously, “YOU! You’re the representative of that Department in this tournament. What were you thinking?” Molly started to berate Bagman in her usual manner, her attention drawn away from Ron.

Harry gestured to the others that they should leave. The other seven children nodded and they all headed for the doors.

Upon reaching the corridor outside the hospital wing, they all doubled over, laughing hard.

“Poor Mr. Bagman,” Rose said, “I almost feel sorry for him, almost.”

“I know,” Ginny said, “Never have I been gladder of how protective Mum is of us.”

“All right,” Ron said, “Enough of this. I’m starving. Let’s get to the kitchens.”

The older Gryffindors rolled their eyes while Maggie and Ti looked bewildered. They all headed down the main staircase, headed for the lower levels and the painting with the basket of fruit, which was the hidden entrance to the kitchens.

When they entered the kitchen, with Harry leading the way, they were surprised by something small that rammed into Harry and almost knocked him over, squealing, “Harry Potter, sir! Harry Potter has finally returned to see Dobby!”

“Er, hello, Dobby,” Harry said as he looked down at the squealing elf, a bit embarrassed. He had forgotten about the exuberant elf he had freed from the Malfoys two years ago and whom he and Ginny had found working in Hogwarts the previous year after the attack by Peter Pettigrew on Ginny.

“Dobby is so happy to see you again, Harry Potter sir,” the house-elf said, as he let go of Harry, his huge eyes brimming with tears of happiness, “Dobby had thought Harry Potter had forgotten Dobby.

"Oh, Harry," Ginny said in Harry's mind, sadness in her tone, "We did forget about him."

Harry knelt down on one knee so he could be at eye level with the elf, "I'm sorry, Dobby. I did forget that you were here. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

Dobby looked at Harry with wide eyes, "Harry Potter should not apologize to Dobby. Dobby is only a house-elf and doesn't mind being forgotten."

"Well, that's wrong, Dobby," Harry said, "You are not my slave or servant. I consider you a good friend and friends shouldn't forget one another."

"Y-you consider Dobby your friend?" the house-elf asked Harry. When Harry nodded, he burst into fresh tears.

"Harry Potter is a great wizard, willing to befriend Dobby," the elf cried.

In an attempt to calm the house-elf, Harry said, "Err, Dobby, I'd like you to meet my other friends." He gently pulled Ginny forward, "You remember Ginny Weasley? She's actually my girlfriend."

"Oh, no, sir," Dobby said, awe in his voice, "she is more than that. She is Harry Potter's soulmate."

The seven Gryffindors' eyes widened.

"H-h-how do you know that, Dobby?" Harry asked, in a soft voice, "You didn't mention it last year."

"Elves see magical bonds, Harry Potter," Dobby said, awe still in his voice, "It be one of our magical abilities. Dobby could barely see it last year but now it is visible to all elves. The bond you have with Miss Weezey is very strong, the strongest Dobby has seen."

Feeling uncomfortable with what Dobby had said, Harry continued introducing his friends, "This is my sister, Rose. This is Ron Weasley, Ginny's brother. This is Hermione Granger. That's Neville Longbottom. Beside him is his sister, Maggie and beside her is...."

“Master Tiberius,” Dobby shouted, rushing forward again and embracing Ti fiercely, “Dobby is glad to see you, Master Tiberius, sir. Dobby was so worried what would happen to you. Dobby was worried that Master Draco would harm Master Tiberius again.”

“H-h-hello, Dobby,” Tiberius said, as he awkwardly returned Dobby’s hug, “I’m glad to see you, too.”

Ti looked at Harry, a smile forming on his face, “Dobby took care of me when I was younger. Father was furious when you freed Dobby, Harry, but I was glad. He and Draco treated him so badly, making him punish himself for the slightest mistake.”

“Good Master Tiberius was so kind to Dobby,” Dobby said, tears again brimming in his eyes, “Master Tiberius always stopped Dobby from punishing himself when Master Draco and Master Lucius were not around. Dobby was sad not to see him again when Dobby was freed.”

“Well, you can see him everyday, Dobby,” Harry said, a smile on his face, “In fact, maybe you can stay with him, Dobby. After all, he’s no longer staying at Malfoy Manor.”

“Master Tiberius is no longer living with his family?” Dobby asked, his eyes bulging.

“No, Dobby,” Tiberius said, sadness in his voice, “Father disowned me last year for being sorted into Gryffindor.” Then his tone became a happier one, “But now, I live with Sirius Black, my mum’s first cousin. He’s great. He’s my guardian and sort of adopted me, so I’m now Tiberius Black and you can call me Ti, Dobby. I’m no longer your master. Maybe we can be friends now.”

Dobby’s started watering and he again hugged Ti fiercely, “Oh, you is as great a wizard as Harry Potter.”

Ti’s cheeks turned red as the elf continued to hug him, unable to respond to such praise. He instead awkwardly patted Dobby’s back. Finally, the elf let go and Ti turned to Harry, “What do you mean that he can stay with me, Harry?”

“Well, maybe Sirius would be willing to hire Dobby,” Harry said, “I was considering the idea earlier this year but forgot all about it with everything going on. Maybe you can ask him now.”

Ti looked thoughtful for a moment then said, “I guess I should. Right now, we have Kreacher. He doesn’t really like Sirius or me, always ranting about how Sirius’ mum would be appalled by what Sirius has been doing to the house and how we weren’t proper purebloods. He has to obey Sirius since he’s the rightful heir to the ‘Noble House of Black’ but refuses to have anything to do with me.”

Dobby looked appalled, “A house-elf refuses to serve good Master Ti? That is horrible. What a bad house-elf he is.”

“See, Ti?” Harry asked, “Dobby would be perfect. We’ll owl Sirius tonight and ask him. I’m sure he’ll be glad to hire Dobby.”

“All right, Harry,” Ti said, “Thanks.”

“Excuse me,” Ron said, looking annoyed, “I hate to break up this little reunion, Harry, Ti, but we came down here for lunch, remember?”

“Ron!” Hermione admonished, “How can you be so callous?”

“Oh, come on,” Ron whined, “I’m the one who was poisoned and missed lunch. Now, I’m the bad guy?”

Harry snickered, “Ron’s right, Hermione.” He turned to Dobby, “Dobby, if you don’t mind, my friends and I sort of skipped lunch. Could we have some sandwiches or something?”

“Sandwiches!” Dobby said, sounding scandalized, “that is not a proper lunch for Hogwarts, Harry Potter. Come this way.”

He pulled on Ti’s hand and led them deeper into the kitchens. They saw that there were four long tables there. Harry noted their positions and thought that they were right below each of the four house tables above, in the Great Hall. They were presently empty since lunch had been over for the past three hours.

There were at least a hundred house-elves in the kitchens as Dobby made them sit down in the table that would correspond to the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall. The elves were all wearing the same uniform, a tea-towel stamped with the Hogwarts crest and tied like a toga. They were all bowing and curtsying to the seven students.

“Harry Potter and his friends would like some food,” Dobby said to the other elves.

Instantly, two dozen of the elves came up to the table, carrying plates, silverware, cups, two jugs of pumpkin juice, a whole roast chicken, several pies and loaves of bread.

“Good service,” Ron said, obviously impressed. The elves beamed and bowed. Hermione, however, frowned.

As they ate, Hermione talked with the elves. She discovered to her horror that the house-elves of Hogwarts were not free like Dobby, but bound to the service of the school. She refused to eat another bite until Rose pointed out that it was an insult to the elves if she didn't eat. Reluctant to offend the house-elves, she started eating again, though she ranted a bit about elves' rights.

After eating their fill, the seven New Marauders thanked the elves for the food. Harry and Ti said goodbye to Dobby, promising to visit him again.

As they climbed the stairs up to the Entrance Hall, Ti turned to Harry, “Harry, do you think Sirius will hire Dobby?”

“I think so, Ti,” Harry answered, “If we explain to him how he raised you and how hard he works, I'm sure he will. After all, I'd think anyone would be better than that Kreacher. Why don't we go to the common room and write him a letter right now?”

Ti grinned, “Okay. Let's go.” Everyone went up to the Gryffindor common room, except for Hermione who said she needed to go to the Library to do some research.

After writing the letter to Sirius, Harry, Ginny and Ti went to the owlery to send it through Hedwig to Sirius' home in London. They hoped he'd reply soon.

Classes resumed the next day. Harry, much to his disgust, was again in the spotlight since he was currently in first place in the tournament. Students keep coming up to him, offering their congratulations.

Several girls would go out of their way to try to talk to Harry while walking in the corridors, leaning on him and even showing him tantalizing glimpses of cleavage, causing him to blush furiously. Some of them were older than Harry, including a few seventh years.

Ginny was not amused and took to walking hand in hand with him between classes, even if she could be late for her own class, despite protests from Harry that it wasn't necessary. She would scowl at any other girl who approached Harry aside from Rose and Hermione.

It all came to a head a few days after Ron's birthday, during breakfast. As the students were eating, a great rush of wings announced the arrival of the delivery owls. One owl delivered Hermione's subscription copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

"Oh my God!" Hermione exclaimed when she got a look at the front page.

"What is it, Hermione?" Ginny asked.

Hermione quickly folded the paper. "Um, oh, it's nothing," she said hastily, "Nothing of concern to you or Harry."

Ginny's eyes narrowed, "I don't think it's nothing if that was your reaction. Hand the paper over, Granger, or I'll make you."

Hermione reluctantly handed the paper over to the redhead.

Ginny took one look at the headline and shrieked, "THIS IS THE LAST STRAW!" She looked furious.

Harry quickly grabbed the paper from his fuming girlfriend and took a look. Ron, Rose, Neville and Ti all crowded together to read over his

shoulder. They all gasped at what they saw. The headline was *The Boy-Who-Lived now the Boy-Who-Plays-The-Field*.

There were several photos of Harry with different girls. Harry's face turned red as the moving pictures clearly showed the girls trying to get him to kiss them and placing their hands suggestively on him. The photograph versions of Harry looked stiff and embarrassed as he tried to disentangle himself from the girls.

Then they read the main story, which was by Rita Skeeter. As they read the article, the friends started feeling increasingly angry at Skeeter.

"How dare that woman insinuate that Harry used Dark spells to enter the tournament," Rose said, with indignation in her voice.

"She even says he's using his standing in the tournament to get girls to go out with him," Hermione said.

"Hey," Neville exclaimed, "There are several quotes from female students." His cheeks started to turn pink as he read them.

"Wow," Ron said, "they think Harry is hot and sexy?" The amazement in his voice was evident.

"That's it!" Ginny exclaimed, getting up. She pointed her wand to her throat and said, "*Sonorus!*"

"All right, you lot!" she said in her magically amplified voice to the rest of the student population, "GET THIS ONCE AND FOR ALL, YOU HUSSIES! I AM HARRY POTTER'S GIRLFRIEND! WE LOVE EACH OTHER VERY MUCH AND INTEND TO DO SO FOR THE REST OF OUR LIVES! YOU'D ALL BETTER BACK OFF FOR THE NEXT FEMALE TO CUDDLE UP TO HARRY BESIDES ME OR HIS SISTERS WILL FIND OUT WHAT THE BAT BOOGEY HEX IS ALL ABOUT! *Quietus!*" Ginny sat back down as the Hall became silent

"Wow," Rose whispered, "that was great, Ginny. It's about time your relationship is confirmed to this school."

Harry turned to Ginny and gave her a quick but fierce kiss, "Thanks, love. I hope they leave me alone now."

"They better or else," Ginny said, looking around the Great Hall with a fierce look in her eyes.

"I just wish you didn't do it like that," Hermione said, a bit of worry in her voice, "You could get a detention for that."

Harry looked up at the professor's table and then said, "Oh, I don't know about that, Hermione. I doubt they were displeased, except of course, for Snape, the greasy git!"

The others looked up at the head table. Sure enough, excluding Snape, all the professors were either smirking or smiling, even McGonagall. Dumbledore had a benign smile on his face and the familiar twinkle in his eye. Moody even had a grin on his battered face. Only Snape was scowling and looked like he wanted to get up and head for the Gryffindor table. However, since only McGonagall could discipline Ginny for what she did and didn't appear like she was going to, he couldn't do a thing about the youngest Weasley's outburst against the rest of Hogwarts's female population.

Just then, the bell rang, signaling the end of breakfast and the impending start of classes for the day. Harry and Ginny got up and headed for the door. They noticed that only their friends stayed close to them. The rest of the school kept their distance from them, especially the females, which suited Harry quite nicely.

Later that night, Ginny and Rose were getting ready for bed when Hermione entered their dormitory room and sat on Ginny's bed. The redheads' other roommates were already asleep.

"Uh, Ginny," Hermione said, "Earlier at breakfast when you gave that ultimatum, you said something about other females cuddling up to Harry besides you or his sisters. Why did you use 'sister' in the plural since only Rose is here at Hogwarts?"

"When I said sisters, Hermione, I meant Rose and you," Ginny said, smiling at the older girl, "I know that Harry has thought of you as a

sister since the two of you became friends. I just wanted to let you know that I do, too.”

Hermione gaped at Ginny for a moment then grabbed her in a fierce hug, “Thank you, Ginny. I’ve always thought of Harry as a brother. ”

Hermione broke away from Ginny and looked uncertainly at Rose, who had a smirk on her face.

“Um, Rose,” Hermione said, “You don’t mind my thinking of Harry as a brother or him thinking of me as a sister, now do you?”

Rose smiled as she sat down beside them, “Of course not, Hermione. I’m glad to have someone as an older sister. Mum is great and all that, but I’ve always wanted to have another girl a bit older than myself and Ginny to talk to about stuff.”

Hermione grinned, “All right then, I’d be happy to be your older sister. Of course, I’m not too knowledgeable on stuff like makeup and partying and boys.”

“That’s okay, Hermione,” Rose said, “We can learn more of that stuff together.”

“Speaking of boys,” Ginny said, “How is it going between you and my brother? You’ve been dating now for two months, yet you seldom hold hands. Hasn’t he asked you to be his girlfriend yet?”

When Hermione’s face fell, both redheads knew the answer was a negative.

“What is wrong with that prat?” Ginny said, “I mean, why is he taking so long to ask you?”

Hermione shrugged, “I guess he needs time to get used to us being more than best friends. I don’t mind. We seem to row much less these days.”

“Something for which the rest of Gryffindor Tower is grateful for,” Harry’s voice suddenly sounded in Ginny’s mind.

"Harry! Stop eavesdropping on us like that. This is girl talk. Go to sleep."

"Oh, all right, Gin. Just let Hermione and Rose know that I love my sisters, both natural and adopted. Oh, I love you, too. Night, Gin."

"Good night, Harry. I love you, too."

"Ginny? Ginny!" Rose said, waving her hand in front of Ginny's face. When Ginny looked at her, she asked, "You and Harry were talking again through your bond, right?"

Ginny's cheeks colored in embarrassment, "Yeah, he was listening in a bit. Don't worry. I told him off and made him go to bed. Oh, he did say that he loves both his sisters, natural and adopted."

The three girls laughed at this.

"Well," Hermione said, "I have another reason for coming to see you and Rose, Ginny. Ever since we saw Dobby and the other House-elves, I've been thinking of how unfair and horrible the Wizarding World treats them. I think it's time that changes." She reached into the pocket of her nightgown and pulled out what looked like badges similar to the ones Hogwarts gave the prefects.

"Hermione," Ginny said, "What are those?"

"I've decided to organize a club to campaign for the rights of house-elves, including putting a stop to their enslavement," Hermione said, "I'm calling the club the Society for the Protection of Elvish Welfare or S.P.E.W. These are badges for the members to wear. I'm hoping that the two of you will be my first members."

Ginny and Rose exchanged surprised and anxious looks.

"Err, Hermione," Rose said, "I'd be the first to agree with you that the house elves shouldn't be treated like slaves. But it's not as simple as having a club to get people to treat them better. Most house-elves aren't like Dobby or Blinky and her family. They really like being enslaved to a family and working for them, with no pay or off time."

“But that’s horrible,” Hermione said, “How can anyone accept it like that?”

“That’s the way it’s been for centuries,” Ginny said, shrugging, “Most families with house-elves are rich and very old, like the Potters and the Malfoys, so they’re very influential with the Ministry. My family may be purebloods but we aren’t as old or have anywhere near their money.”

“Rose,” Hermione said, turning to the other redhead, “why hasn’t your family done anything to remove the enslavement of house-elves? Surely they could have done something, like push for an emancipation law.”

Rose sighed, “I don’t know if it would have been that simple, Hermione. As Ginny said, there are many wealthy pureblood families that have house-elves and enjoy a large amount of influence in the Ministry. They’d fight any law that freed house-elves from their Wizarding families since they like having servants they didn’t have to pay.”

“Then we really have to start with our generation,” Hermione said, “we have to show them how cruel and wrong it is to enslave house-elves. That’s the main purpose why I’m organizing S.P.E.W.”

“Uh, Hermione,” Rose said, “I don’t know if your club will attract many kids with a name like SPEW.”

“It’s S.P.E.W., Rose,” Hermione said, indignation in her voice, “It’s not spew. Anyway, the name doesn’t really matter. It’s the ideals of the club that will attract members.”

Both redheads sighed. For an intelligent girl, Hermione could be so dumb sometimes in dealing with people. They exchanged a look of agreement.

“All right, Hermione,” Ginny said, “We’ll be your first two members. However, we want to think of another name for the club, okay?”

Hermione looked like she was about to disagree but finally shrugged, “Okay. That’s fine. Now, I was thinking of having our first meeting in

Hogsmeade during the next Hogsmeade weekend. That'll give us about two weeks to seek out new members. I'm sure we can get your brothers to join." She went on talking about her plans for the club, not noticing that the two redheads had been a bit alarmed by her last statement.

Ginny and Rose exchanged worried glances. How would they get their brothers to join Hermione's new brainchild? Maybe they had a chance with Harry, but Ron would most likely prove to be nearly impossible, even if it was the brainchild of the girl he was dating. They sighed and decided to pay attention to Hermione's plans. Maybe they could inject a bit of reality into them. Hopefully, two weeks would give them enough time to organize the club.

Chapter 54: Siblings' first birthdays

Disclaimer: Rose, Andrew and Daisy Potter, Maggie Longbottom and Ti Malfoy/Black are my own creations. Everything else is the work of JKR and is not being used for any personal profit.

A/N: I'm back! SO sorry for the long delay but I don't have as much time to write lately as I had when I started this story. I do intend to finish it, which will be in a few more chapters. There will be a sequel which will cover Harry's fifth to seventh year and will include the Final Battle. For now, here's the next chapter. Please read and review.

The next morning, once Harry was awake, Ginny talked to him mentally about Hermione's new project. Harry was not surprised that Hermione would think of such a venture. He reluctantly agreed to join the new club for the sake of his almost-sister. Of course, he asked Ginny to make sure the name was changed and that she and Rose ensure Hermione didn't offend anyone with her enthusiasm.

When the New Marauders meet for their morning jog, which Harry had decided to resume after the Second task, along with their martial arts sessions, Hermione took the opportunity to talk to the rest of the Marauders about her club.

Neville, Ti and Maggie hesitantly agreed to be members while Fred and George politely refused to join.

As expected, Ron refused to join and laughed at its name and purpose, commenting that dragons would stop breathing fire before anyone paid attention to it. Rose and Ginny glared at him. Hermione then refused to go with him on the next Hogsmeade visit. This surprised Ron and he attempted to apologize but she simply stormed out of the common room. She then avoided him for the rest of the day.

Later that day, Ginny and Rose managed to convince Colin Creevey and his brother, Dennis to be members though they felt guilty for using the muggleborn brothers' ignorance of the issue's controversy.

However, they couldn't get anyone else interested in the club. The other students reacted with disgust, astonishment or bewilderment to

the purpose of the club. Hermione became exasperated with her lack of progress and called off her planned meeting for the meantime.

Ginny and Rose breathed a sigh of relief over this though they didn't dare let Hermione know. They had already come up with a better name but hadn't told Hermione yet.

The following day, they all found out that it was a good thing that Hermione had postponed her first club meeting.

Artemis, Lily's owl, came with invitations to Daisy and Andrew Potter's first birthday. The day that Lily and James had chosen to celebrate coincided with the Saturday of the next Hogsmeade visit. The party was set for three o'clock that day. The Weasleys, Hermione, Neville, Maggie, Ti, Sirius, Sam Turgis, Remus, McGonagall, Hagrid and Dumbledore were all invited to celebrate that milestone.

All of the ones at Hogwarts accepted the invitation. The news excited Harry and Rose and they looked forward to going home for that.

As the days passed, Hermione continued to avoid Ron, including seating away from him in the classes they shared. After a week of this, Ron asked for Harry's advice on how to approach Hermione. Harry suggested that he send her something like flowers and a note of apology. Ron thought about it for a few minutes then asked to borrow Hedwig.

The following morning, Hermione woke up to find a dozen red roses on her bedside desk with a long apology letter from Ron. After reading the note, she finally accepted Ron's apology. Ron promised to join Hermione's club once it started up. Hermione then agreed to go with him to Hogsmeade.

On the day before the Hogsmeade visit, Ti finally received a reply from Sirius about Dobby. Sirius apologized for the late reply since he had been very busy with his Auror duties. He thought hiring Dobby was a brilliant idea and said he would talk to Dumbledore about it the next afternoon when they were all in Potter Manor. He added that he hoped to have another bit of news that would please Ti. Both Harry and Ti wondered what that meant.

The following day, as soon as they had finished their breakfast, Harry and Ginny got up from the Gryffindor table so they could get to Hogsmeade early. They still had to get their presents for Daisy and Andrew. Neville, Rose, Ron and Hermione soon joined them at the Entrance Hall's doors.

Hermione also needed to buy a birthday gift for her new brother, Daniel, who would be celebrating his own first birthday in two weeks.

The six Gryffindors were soon looking around the shops. While they were in Honeyduke's, Ron suggested getting Harry and Rose's siblings some candy. Hermione reacted badly to that, berating Ron for attempting to ruin the babies' teeth even before they had any. Rose gently reminded Hermione that wizards and witches didn't get cavities.

Ron wondered to the others why Hermione had reacted badly. Harry reminded Ron that Hermione's parents were dentists and had probably raised Hermione to avoid sweets. Ron just shrugged and bought some Chocolate Frogs for Harry's baby brother and sister. Neville bought some candy for his sister.

They found a store selling children's clothes. Harry, Ginny and Rose bought a jumper for each of the Potter twins, blue for Andy and pink for Daisy. Neville decided to buy a couple of pairs of baby booties in the same store.

Hermione was delighted to find that a bookstore had just opened beside Dervish and Banges. She found several books for babies and bought them all. Ron asked her why she got so many. She told him that she was going to give them only one each and save the rest for Christmas.

A few minutes later, they were standing in front of Zonko's when Ron turned to Hermione and asked hesitantly, "Er, Hermione, w-w-would you be my girlfriend?"

Hermione turned to him and eyed him for a couple of seconds before she smiled and said, "Finally! I've been waiting for you to ask that since Valentine's Day."

Ron gaped and asked, "Y-you have?"

"Yes, Ron, I have," she replied, a smile still on her face, "Took you long enough. Still, my answer is yes, I will be your girlfriend."

Ron broke out in a grin and, pulling her closer to him, he kissed her on the lips.

Hermione didn't respond and just stood there, her eyes wide after Ron had released her.

"Er, Mione?" Ron asked concern in his voice, "What is it? Did I do it wrong?"

Hermione shook her head and smiled again, "No, Ron. I was just surprised, that's all. It was a nice kiss." She leaned into him and whispered, "I'd like to do it again, just not in front of all these people."

Ron turned around and his face turned as red as his hair as he saw several people staring at them, including several of their classmates.

"Way to go, Weasley!" Seamus shouted at him. Several other boys hooted and clapped.

Beside them, Harry, Ginny, Rose and Neville were grinning.

"Finally, Ron," Ginny said, "I was beginning to wonder about you."

"Yeah, mate," Harry said, clapping Ron on the shoulder, "What took you so long?"

"Well," Ron said, shrugging his shoulders, "I wasn't sure if Hermione would say yes."

"I never had a doubt she would, Ron," Harry said, "Oh, by the way, Ron, since Daniel is too young, I'll be the one to pound you if you hurt her, okay? Remember, I consider her a sister, just like Rose."

Ron gulped and said, "Um, yeah, sure, okay, Harry."

Hermione grinned at Harry then tentatively extended her hand towards Ron who took it gently in his larger one. They walked inside the joke shop with smiles on their faces, followed by the other four.

After half an hour, they walked over to the Three Broomsticks for lunch. They found it packed with their classmates and other Hogwarts students. Even a few of the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students were there. They were surprised to see Viktor Krum there with Parvati since they couldn't remember seeing them together before. Yet, they seemed to be comfortably conversing, unmindful of the rest of the crowd.

Harry and the others joined Colin, Luna, Melinda and Lisa at a long table. The younger students noticed Ron and Hermione holding hands, causing them all to grin.

"So he finally asked you to be his girlfriend, Hermione?" Melinda asked. When Hermione smiled and nodded, she added, "Good, took him long enough."

"What does that mean?" Ron asked, "Has everyone been waiting for me to ask her?"

"Yes, Ron," Colin said, a grin also on his face, "I think the entire tower was waiting on you. If you'd taken longer, maybe a betting pool would have started."

Ron groaned and dropped his head on the table. Harry grinned and patted his shoulder.

"That's all right, Ron," Neville said, "At least you finally did."

"Oh, you boys, really," Hermione said, her face red.

Everyone else laughed.

After lunch, they returned to the castle so they could get to Potter Manor early for the party. They went to Dumbledore's office where they found Maggie, Fred, George and Ti already waiting for them. One by one, they used the floo network to get to Potter Manor. Dumbledore, McGonagall and Hagrid would follow them later.

James was in the living room when they arrived and greeted them warmly. A few minutes later, Lily came in carrying Daisy. Remus was behind her, carrying Andrew. They set them down in a playpen set up in the living room.

Daisy was dressed in a pink skirt and a white blouse while Andrew was dressed in a light yellow shirt and pale blue shorts. They both had white booties on.

Harry noted that Daisy's black hair was not as wild as his and was braided into two plaits, with a pink ribbon clipped to the right side of her head. Andrew's red hair, on the other hand, was sticking out a bit in the back and a fringe covered part of his forehead

The teens all gathered around the babies who stood up hanging on to the side of the playpen, wide-eyed on seeing all the people. Their eyes brightened as they saw their older brother and sister.

"awee," Daisy cried, throwing up her arms toward Harry. Andrew did the same thing as he cried, "Wose!"

Harry and Rose exchanged wide-eyed looks. Harry turned to his father, "Hey, Dad. When did the little tykes start to talk? They were just saying nonsense words last Christmas. How do they know our names now?"

James smiled, "They said their first word a few weeks ago. It was 'mum'. Then it was 'da' a few days later. Since then, your mum and I have been saying your names to them while pointing to a moving picture of you and Rose. Actually, it's the first time they actually said them."

Harry grinned, "That's great, Dad. I was afraid they may not know us since we've been away at school."

"Yeah, Dad, Mum," Rose said, "That is awesome."

"That's a smart girl, Daisy," Harry said, trying to lift her up, "Oof! You're getting really big and heavy. Your big brother can hardly lift you up anymore." He gave her a big hug instead then did the same to Andrew, "Hi, little brother. You're getting big, too."

Ginny and Hermione started trying to teach the twins their own names, with little success. After a few minutes, most of the boys decided to go outside to have a game of Quidditch, dragging with them a reluctant Harry, who had wanted to spend some more time with his siblings.

Harry, Ron and Fred formed one team while George, Neville and Ti formed the other. Since there were only three to a side, they had two chasers and one keeper per team, Ron and Neville doing the latter job. Surprisingly, Ti showed great skill as a chaser, almost offsetting Ron's skill as a keeper.

After an hour, during which only ten points separated the two teams, Ginny joined Harry's team while Rose joined George's team as chasers. This allowed Fred and George to revert to their favored roles as beaters, though on opposite sides.

With the benefit of their ability to talk mentally, Harry and Ginny managed to increase the lead of their team, though Rose and Ti were able to get a few goals past Ron.

After another hour, Lily called them down to the party which they were having on the porch. There was a long table set up with two dozen seats, including two high chairs at the head of the table. Dumbledore, McGonagall, Hagrid, Sirius and Sam were already there, saying their hellos to the birthday boy and girl.

As they were seating down, they heard the floo activate in the living room. A couple of minutes later, Molly and Arthur came out onto the porch.

"Sorry we're late, James, Lily," Arthur said, "We were waiting for Percy."

Ginny came up to her parents and gave them each a hug then she asked "So where is he, Dad?"

"Er," Arthur said, looking a little nervous, "He had a spot of work to do at the Ministry and extended his regrets that he couldn't come."

“Why, that insensitive git,” Ginny almost screamed out, “He’s working at the Ministry today? This is a family gathering. How can he choose to work, instead of being with his family?” Her face was turning red with her anger. The other Weasley children looked just as mad.

Harry reached out to her and placed his hand over hers, *“It’s all right, Gin,”* he said mentally to her.

“No, Harry,” she answered back, her mental voice filled with her anger, *“It’s not all right. We’ve been close for years and have always celebrated birthdays and holidays together. Now, with our bond, we’re even more one family. You know that we Weasleys consider family more important than anything. Percy should be able to set aside one day for that. He’s going to regret this.”*

Harry remained silent, knowing he wouldn’t be able to change Ginny’s mind.

Arthur then added that Bill and Charlie would also be unable to come since they couldn’t get any more time off from their jobs abroad, much to their disappointment.

“Well,” Lily said, brightly, “that’s quite all right. Let’s just eat up. There’s a nice cake waiting for our birthday boy and girl to blow its candles out.”

They soon settled down to the meal; conversations breaking out around the table. Once they were done, Blinky cleared the dishes and Lily set the cake in front of her twins, who looked wide-eyed at it. It was a large round cake with white frosting covering it and the words ‘Happy Birthday, Andrew and Daisy’ done in blue and pink over most of it. A single large candle was set in the middle.

They sang ‘Happy Birthday’ then helped the twins blow the candles out. As they ate the cake, they helped Andy and Daisy open their presents.

There was an assortment of clothes and toys. Lily and James thanked everyone for the gifts.

Then, Sirius stood up from where he was seated beside Sam. "We don't want to upstage Andrew and Daisy but we have a bit of news." He took Sam's hand in his and smiled down at her, "Sam and I eloped last night and got married."

Everyone looked surprised and shocked, unable to say a word.

After a few seconds of silence, Sirius raised an eyebrow and said, "Well, I didn't expect such a reaction."

James shook himself out of his stupor, walked up to his best friend and clapped him on the shoulder, "That's great, Padfoot! Congratulations! How'd this happen?"

Sirius grinned, "Well, I realized after a couple of dates that I'm in love with Sam. I let her go once, which was a terrible mistake. So, I made a decision to ask her to marry me. I did it last night while we were taking a walk after dinner. She said yes, much to my surprise." He looked down at Sam who stood up and embraced Sirius. Then she turned to the others.

"I told him that I was in love with him already when we first dated," Sam said, "After he broke it off, I tried so hard to forget him but couldn't. Then he asked me out a few weeks after these little tykes were born. I tried to keep from falling in love with him again, but did anyway. Anyway, after he proposed, we started to discuss when to have the wedding. Then it occurred to both of us that we really don't have any other family since both our parents are gone and I'm an only child."

"Plus," Sirius broke in, "she didn't really care about having a big ceremony. So, we snuck off to Paris and got married there. We came here straight from the hotel we spent the night in."

Lily then moved forward to embrace Sirius and Sam in a warm hug, "Congratulations, you two. We're so happy for you."

This broke the others out of their shock. Soon everyone was crowding around Sirius and Sam to offer their own congratulations. However, there was one person who didn't come near the two

newlyweds, someone who mattered to Sirius just as much as the woman he had married.

Ti stared at Sirius and Sam, a look of surprise still on his face. Sirius was the first to see his expression. He strode away from the group, up to Ti and knelt down beside the boy.

Ti,” Sirius said, softly, “I know this is a shock and seems all of a sudden, but we hoped you’d be pleased. I mean, you seemed to like Sam whenever the three of us were together. I hoped that you’d like to see her all the time. I’ve loved her for years, Ti.

I hope you’ll come to love her just as much as I do. It won’t change what we have. You’ll still live with us. Sam knows all about what you’ve been through.”

By this time, Sam had come up to them and sat down beside Ti. “That’s true, Ti,” Sam said as she smiled, “I know what Sirius means to you and what you mean to Sirius. I won’t come between the two of you. I do hope that you and I will become just as close, so we can be a real family.”

Everyone else seemed to be holding their breath as Ti looked at Sirius and Sam. After a couple of seconds, that seemed an eternity to Sam and Sirius, Ti smiled and threw his arms around both of them, hugging them tightly.

“Of course I’m for it,” Ti said to them. Drawing back from them, he turned to Sam, grinning, “So, Sam, do I have to call you ‘Aunt Sam’ now?”

Sam grimaced for a second, “Oh no. You don’t call Sirius ‘uncle’, so let’s keep it to Sam. Aunt Sam makes me feel as old as Professor Dumbledore.” Her eyes bulged as she caught sight of Dumbledore, “Oops! Sorry, Professor.”

“That’s quite all right, Mrs. Black,” Dumbledore said, a smile on his face.

Sam smiled again, “I think I’ll like being called that, Mrs. Samantha Black.”

Everyone laughed. Harry and Ginny felt happy that their friend was getting a new family to replace the one that had abandoned him, one that will love him as much as he deserved.

The party soon wound down as the twins were falling asleep from eating all that food, especially the cake. Sirius remembered to ask Dumbledore about Dobby and the headmaster was happy to let Dobby go to work for Ti and his new family.

The kids went back to Hogwarts with Dumbledore, McGonagall and Hagrid, feeling happy. The Easter holidays soon came, which they spent in Hogwarts.

On the last Saturday of the Easter holidays, it was Hermione's brother who celebrated his first birthday. This time, only Ron, Harry, Ginny and Rose were invited because the party would have Muggles present, mostly relatives of the Grangers.

The five Gryffindors dressed in Muggle clothing for the party. They flooded from Dumbledore's office to the Leaky Cauldron in London after lunch then took a cab to Hermione's home.

Hermione lived with her parents in a lovely two-story house in the suburbs on the north side of London. The house was painted in beige and light yellow with a brick red tiled roof.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger met them at the entryway. They were a bit surprised when Hermione introduced Ron as her boyfriend but didn't say anything. Ron looked nervous as he shook Mr. Granger's hand.

After that, they went up to Daniel's room, where the one-year old was playing with a ball in his playpen. His eyes lit up when he saw Hermione. Hermione lifted him out of the playpen and set him down on the floor. The five teenagers spent the next hour playing with him. Well, Hermione, Harry, Ginny and Rose did, but Ron was more interested in the various Muggle toys in the room like the various Fisher Price toys. Before they knew it, Hermione's parents were calling them down since the majority of the guests had arrived.

Hermione's relatives were curious about Hermione's friends. They had all been told that Hermione went to an exclusive school for gifted

children in Scotland. Her four friends had to watch what they said. Fortunately, everyone was more concerned with Daniel and the party.

Daniel seemed to enjoy his party, happily tearing his presents open, though he quickly lost interest in each one as something new caught his eye. The five teenagers enjoyed the party food, like the cake and ice cream.

Finally, the guests had all left, leaving the Grangers and the four Wizing children. Hermione's mum invited them to stay for dinner, which they gladly accepted. Dumbledore had given them his permission to return to Hogwarts anytime they wanted.

As they ate, Mr. and Mrs. Granger asked Harry, Ginny, Rose and Ron many questions about growing up in the Wizing World like their education before Hogwarts (they were all home schooled by Molly), activities during holidays, places they visited on vacations and how their homes worked.

After they had done with dessert, Mrs. Granger turned to Hermione, "Honey, you introduced Ron earlier as your boyfriend. Aren't you a bit young for that?"

Hermione's cheeks turned pink, "Mum! We're just dating. It isn't like we're engaged or something like that. Anyway, he only asked me to be his girlfriend a couple of weeks ago. We're taking things slowly."

Ron suppressed a smirk at that statement. The fact was that they had been snogging in broom closets over the past two weeks as often as they could get away with it. The last time, their hands had even done a bit of wandering but nothing major.

"I see," Mr. Granger said, "All right, dear, just don't get carried away. We don't want to be grandparents yet. I did notice that Harry and Ginny seemed to be very close to each other."

Glad for the distraction from his relationship with Hermione, Ron said, "Oh yes, Mr. Granger. They've been going out for more than a year now."

Hermione's parents exchanged looks of surprise.

"Your parents are okay with this, Ron?" Mr. Granger asked Ron.

"Our parents are fine with it, Mr. Granger," Ginny answered, "Harry and I have known each other for years and love each other very much. We'll probably get married after I graduate from Hogwarts."

"Er, isn't that a bit young for marriage?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"It's different in the Wizarding World, Mrs. Granger," Rose replied, "Wizards and witches are usually ready to go to work after graduating from Hogwarts. We can earn enough to support a family by then. Many of us do marry right after graduation. Our parents and Ron and Ginny's parents did just that."

The Grangers looked bewildered by that information but before they could say anything, Daniel started to cry.

"Oh dear," Mrs. Granger said, "I think he needs his diaper changed."

"Let me do it, Mum," Hermione said.

Mrs. Granger smiled, "Of course, dear. Let's get him up to his room." She lifted Daniel up from his high chair and carried him upstairs, Hermione following in her wake.

Mr. Granger invited the others to wait for Hermione in the living room. However, Ginny and Rose insisted on helping him clean up. Harry and Ron reluctantly agreed to help, over the protests of Mr. Granger.

They cleared the table and washed the dishes the Muggle way, in spite of Ron's grumbling about it being like doing detention for Filch.

When Hermione returned, Mr. Granger insisted on driving them to the Leaky Cauldron. It was a bit of a tight fit in the back of the Granger's car, but they managed it. Once they arrived at the pub, they said goodbye to Hermione's dad and entered the pub to floo back to Hogwarts.

The following Monday was the start of the summer term so they reluctantly returned their attention to their studies. They did find it interesting that Krum would often walk Parvati to and from classes.

Hermione said that she was relieved that the Bulgarian boy had found someone else to bestow his affections on. Ron heartily agreed with her, though he only said so when Hermione wasn't around.

They got a break on the last Saturday of April, the 24th, which was Ti's birthday. Unfortunately, they couldn't leave Hogwarts anymore so they held his party in the Tower at lunchtime. Harry, Ginny, Rose and Maggie kept Ti occupied by the lake while the others prepared the common room.

The surprised look on his face when he came through the Portrait Hole was immediately replaced by a huge grin that stayed in place for the rest of the party. His friends gave him presents which they had bought during the last Hogsmeade weekend. The party carried on until nearly dinnertime when Ron announced he was hungry again. Everyone shook their heads at that but decided to go to the Great Hall anyway.

The weeks passed quickly after that and Harry was so swamped with work that he had forgotten about the Triwizard tournament until McGonagall approached him after Transfiguration class in the last week of May.

"Mr. Potter," she said, "You are to go down to the Quidditch Pitch at nine o'clock tonight."

"Um, what ever for, Professor?" Harry asked, bewildered. He vaguely felt exasperation emanating from Ginny.

McGonagall looked sternly at him, "Why, for the information on the third task, of course. Don't tell me you've forgotten about the Tournament?"

"Er, of course not, Professor," he answered, "I was starting to wonder about it lately."

"Very well," she said, "Mr. Bagman will be there to inform you and the other champions of the nature of the last task. Do not be late."

"Yes, Professor," Harry said, "I'll be on time." He then walked out of the classroom.

"Harry," Ginny said in his mind once he was walking down the corridor, "I can't believe you forgot about the tournament."

"Well, the professors have been working us hard, Gin," Harry replied to her mentally, "All that studying tends to require a lot of focus."

"All right, Harry," Ginny said, "I do wonder what the third task will be about. After the dragon and the lake, what weird stuff has Bagman and Crouch come up with now?"

"Well, I'll be finding that out later, Gin," Harry said, "Anyway, right now, I'd rather think about seeing you at dinner and looking for a new place for us to snog in after my trip to the Quidditch pitch."

Ginny giggled, "My, my, Mr. Potter. You are incorrigible. At least, you have your priorities right. I'll see you later at lunch then, love."

"All right, Gin," Harry replied. As he felt Ginny withdraw from his mind, his thoughts turned back to wondering about the third task. He also was curious about it. Why did he, Viktor and Fleur have to meet Bagman on the Quidditch Pitch? That was very strange. Well, he'd find out tonight so there was no use in worrying over it. Anyway, as he had told Ginny, he'd prefer thinking about snogging her than the third task. So, with a smile on his face, Harry entered his next class and left thinking about the final task of the Triwizard Tournament to a later time.

Chapter 55: The Third Task

Disclaimer: Rose, Andrew and Daisy Potter, Daniel Granger, Maggie Longbottom and Ti Malfoy/Black are my own creations. Everything else is part of the wonderful work of JKR and is not being used for any personal profit.

Later that night, at fifteen minutes before nine, Harry left the Gryffindor common room after giving Ginny a quick kiss and walked through the grounds down to the Quidditch stadium. There he found that the pitch was now occupied by hedges arranged in a twisting pattern. He met Bagman, Viktor and Fleur in the middle.

Bagman quickly explained the task. The hedges would grow within a month to form a maze. The champions had to find their way through it to the other side, where the judges would await them and award the first person out full points. Along the way, they would face various obstacles including creatures provided by Hagrid.

Harry had inwardly groaned, knowing full well what kind of creatures Hagrid could provide.

After briefing them, Bagman suggested that they head back to the castle. Harry found himself walking side by side with Viktor. Viktor gave Harry a smile.

The two male champions had become friendlier over the last month since Viktor started spending time with Parvati in the library and on the grounds, in addition to walking her to her classes.

They had even discussed Quidditch at one time. Viktor had praised Harry for his flying performance during the first task and suggested that Harry should consider a professional Quidditch career after Hogwarts, something he had not thought about before. Harry was intrigued with the idea but was afraid of his father's reaction if Harry decided to abandon becoming an Auror.

"So, Harry," Viktor said, "Vot kind off creatures do you think ve vill face?"

Harry smiled, "Well, knowing Hagrid, they'll be a challenge. He has an affection for the more, um, interesting ones. I doubt we'll meet any flubber worms or pixies."

Viktor raised an eyebrow at this but just nodded his head.

After a few seconds of silence, Harry asked, "So, how are you and Parvati getting along?"

Viktor stopped walking and eyed Harry suspiciously, "Vot is it to you?"

Harry raised his hands, "I don't mean anything, Viktor. Parvati's a nice girl. I'm just glad you found someone here to get together with, after Hermione. Um, I'm sorry that didn't work out."

"It is all right, Harry," Viktor said and shrugged his shoulders, "After the New Year, Hermy-own-ninny didn't talk vit me as much as she did before the Yule Ball. Of course, your red headed friend, Ron, I believe you call him, vos usually vit her, scowling at me."

Harry was surprised by that last bit about Hermione and Ron. He hadn't been aware that his two best friends had been spending more time with each other before their first date. Then again, he had been spending most of his time with Ginny.

"But then," Viktor continued, a smile forming on his face, "I met Parvati two days after ve did the second task. I remembered that she vos beautiful at the Yule Ball and that, like Hermy-own-ninny, she vosn't one of the girls following me all around Hogwarts. She is not as intelligent as Hermy-own-ninny but that is all right. I could not understand haff of vot Hermy-own-ninny said anyway."

Harry grinned, "You're not alone there, mate. Half of the time, neither can we. But that's the way she is and we love her for it."

Now that he had Viktor's attention, Harry decided to ask him something he needed to know about the older boy's school, though he was a bit hesitant and hoped he wouldn't offend Krum.

“Um, Viktor,” Harry said, “I hope you don’t mind my asking, but do they really teach you the Dark Arts at Durmstrang? If you don’t want to tell me, just say so.”

Viktor eyed him shrewdly for a few seconds then said, “I guess there is no harm in telling you, Harry. After vot happened in the second task, I feel you would be a good friend. But to answer your vestion, yes, they teach us some of the Dark Arts. At least they did until last year.”

“Last year?” Harry asked, “Did they stop teaching them this year? Why?”

“Let us move over near the voods, Harry,” Viktor said, “This is something I do not think anyone else should know.”

Harry followed him back to the edge of the Forbidden Forest and felt Ginny open her senses to him, eager to listen in.

Once they got there, Viktor spoke again, “You must understand, Harry, that sometimes learning something helps one understand that thing and helps in learning to fight it. That is van reason they teach the Dark Arts at Durmstrang, so ve can understand it in order to fight it better. Unfortunately, the previous Headmaster, Professor Karkaroff, had some of the darker and very dangerous spells taught to the older students, spells that are better off forgotten. He even let some Dark Magic rituals be taught, rituals that involved human sacrifice in exchange for pover. Fortunately, all of that stopped this year vhen Professor Propanov took over.”

Harry was stunned by what Viktor had revealed and felt Ginny’s own surprise. “I remember Professor Dumbledore saying that Professor Propanov had just been named your Headmaster this year. So what happened to Karkaroff?”

Viktor shrugged, “He vanished from the school at the end of February. No one knows vot exactly happened but it vos as if he had left in a hurry. There vas no indication that anything vas wrong the day before he disappeared. But the following day, his rooms vere in disarray and his clothes and most of his personal things vere missing. I know ovur Ministry and Aurors haff tried to find him but as far as I know, they haff not had any success.”

“Now that is strange,” Harry said, “So, no one has any idea why he left or where he is?”

“Yes,” Viktor said.

“I wonder if Dumbledore knows something,” Harry said, “Anyway, I’d better get back to the castle. My friends will want to know what the task is.”

“So vill mine,” Viktor said, smiling, “I vill be seeing you, Harry.”

Harry watched Viktor walk down to the lake and the Durmstrang ship for a few seconds then turned back toward the castle. He knew Ginny was telling Hermione, Ron, Rose, Neville and Ti about the Third task but she refrained from telling them about Karkaroff until he had given his permission to do so. Harry and Ginny didn’t want to break any trust Harry had just formed with Krum.

Harry and his friends weren’t sure on what creatures Hagrid might set in the maze but agreed that whatever they were, they wouldn’t be the docile kind. The next day, Harry sent Hedwig to his parents with a letter, informing them of the nature of the task.

Hedwig came back with a reply during lunch. James asked Harry to resume practicing the spells he had been taught over the summer as well as some spells that Moody had taught in his DADA class since most of them would be useful when he encountered any dangerous creatures in the maze.

Practicing the spells he knew presented Harry with a problem. Some of the spells could cause significant damage if done in an empty classroom. He needed to find a place to practice where he wouldn’t be disturbed, even accidentally.

Professor Moody came up to him at the Gryffindor table at the end of dinner. “Potter, I’d like a word with you.”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry said. He turned to Ginny and said to her mentally, *“I’ll see you guys after this in the common room.”*

Moody led Harry to his office just above the DADA classroom. He bade Harry to sit down in a chair in front of his desk while he sat down behind the desk. Moody detached his wooden leg and set it on a stand behind the desk before talking to Harry.

“So, Potter,” the ex-Auror began, “you now know what the Third Task is going to be about. How are you going to prepare for it?”

“Well, Professor,” Harry said, “With Hagrid providing the creatures who will be some of the obstacles, it won’t be easy. My Dad and Dumbledore taught me several spells over the summer that will be useful. I already sent Dad an owl telling him about the task and he advised me to practice the spells again, along with some of the spells you’ve taught in class.”

“Good advice, Potter,” Moody said, a rare smile breaking out on his hard face, “Your father has a good head on his shoulders, though I know some people around here would disagree with me. Still, he’s one of the best Aurors I’ve had the pleasure of training. There’s no one else I’d have as Head Auror.”

“Uh, Professor,” Harry said, “I haven’t had the chance to ask you this. I know it’s been so long, but do you know how my name came to be in the Goblet of Fire?”

Moody scowled as he answered, “Not exactly, Potter. Dumbledore let me check the Goblet out after the Choosing of the champions. I couldn’t find much except that it was touched by very Dark Magic.”

“That confirms what I’ve suspected all along then,” Harry said, “Voldemort wanted me in this tournament.”

“Most likely, lad,” Moody said, nodding his head, “No one else would be willing to use such Magic. So, you better be careful in that Maze, all right, lad? Now, you should get back to your common room so you can find that room you need to practice those spells.”

Harry nodded and thanked the ex-Auror.

Later that night, when the rest of Gryffindor house had gone to bed, he and the New Marauders were at their usual place in front of the

fireplace in the common room. They studied the Marauder's Map for almost an hour but couldn't find a proper room on it for Harry's purpose.

"Harry," Rose finally said, "You do remember that the Chamber of Secrets never appeared on the Map two years ago, right?" Her gaze momentarily shifted to Ginny with an apologetic expression for mentioning the Chamber. "There may be other rooms like that in Hogwarts, places that most people don't know about. You can practice your spells in such a place without anyone coming upon you."

"That's a brilliant suggestion, Rose," Harry said, "But there is just one problem. How do we find such a room?"

"Harry," Ginny said in his mind, "Do you think the house-elves may know of such a room?"

"Probably, Gin," he replied mentally to her, "I'm sure they know every inch of the castle. But how do we ask them? Of course! I know who to ask."

He turned to Ti, "Uh, Ti, could you call Dobby over here for a second?"

Even though Dumbledore had allowed Dobby to work for Sirius and Ti, Sirius had decided to let Dobby stay in Hogwarts until the end of the school term to be close to Ti. So Dobby was still in the castle.

"Uh, sure, Harry, okay," Ti replied, a bit puzzled, but he turned his face toward the ceiling and said loudly, "DOBBY! Please come here!"

A second later, the exuberant house-elf appeared within the circle of friends. "Master Ti called Dobby. What can Dobby do for good Master Ti?"

His face turning a bit red, Ti said, "Uh, it's not me. Harry wants to talk with you."

Dobby's eyes widened, "The Great Harry Potter wants to talk with Dobby. Ohhhh, what can Dobby do for the Great Harry Potter?"

Harry felt his own cheeks burning as the house-elf started fawning over him, "Er, I just have a question, Dobby. Um, you've been working in the castle for the past year. Well, we need a room that we can practice spell work in, a place where we won't be disturbed by any student or professor."

Dobby's face screwed up for a moment as he thought, "I know of a place, Harry Potter. The other house-elves call it the 'Come and Go' room or the Room of Requirement."

"Why is it called that, Dobby?" Hermione asked.

"Well, Miss Grangee," Dobby said, "the room only comes when someone really needs it. He has to be thinking hard of what he wants the room for. When he is done with the room, the room vanishes."

"Great, Dobby," Harry said, smiling, "that's perfect. Where is it and how do you get in?"

"It's on the same floor as the entrance to this tower, Harry Potter, sir," Dobby answered, "in a corridor with a large window at one end and a man-sized vase at the other end. The door is across from a tapestry of a strange looking wizard who seems to be dancing with trolls. But the door only appears if you walk past it three times while thinking of what kind of room you need."

"I'll check it out right now," Harry said, getting up, "I just get my invisibility cloak."

He turned to Ginny. "*Want to come with me, Gin?*" he asked her mentally.

Ginny grinned, "*Of course, Harry.*"

"Hey," Ron said, "are you two talking with your minds again? I know I hate it when you do that. It usually means you're planning a snogging session somewhere."

Ginny glared at him then pulled Harry towards her by the front of his robes and gave him a very forceful kiss on the lips.

Ron rolled his eyes, "Never mind. I guess you'll snog wherever you want."

"Very good, brother," Ginny said, "Of course, I think you and Hermione would do the same."

Ron and Hermione turned red at this statement. Harry came back with his invisibility cloak. He and Ginny then disappeared under it. Neville opened the Portrait Hole so they could get out.

Once outside the tower, they walked down the corridors on that floor, looking for the tapestry Dobby mentioned. They found the corridor Dobby had described, with a man-sized vase at one end and a large window at the other end.

"Harry," Ginny said, "Look in the middle of the corridor. That appears to be a tapestry."

They moved closer and found that it was a very large moving tapestry of a wizard and some trolls.

"Uh, Ginny," Harry said mentally, "Am I seeing things or is that man actually in tights and dancing ballet in front of the trolls."

"No, love, you aren't imagining things. He really is pirouetting around those trolls. There's a faded plaque underneath it. It says 'Barnabas the Barmy and his misguided attempt to teach ballet to some trolls. Yes, this must be the right tapestry. Now where is the door? The opposite wall is blank."

"Remember what Dobby said, Gin. The door only appears if you walk three times past it, thinking of what kind of room you want. Let's try it."

Harry started pacing in front of the blank wall, thinking, "I want a room to practice spells in", over and over again.

As he passed the blank wall the third time, an ornate door appeared in the wall.

Harry pulled the door open and he and Ginny entered the room. They gasped in awe at what they saw.

The room looked like a duplicate of the Duel Practice room at Potter Manor, with its slate floor covered in mattresses and stone walls. It was so close that Harry thought that if he stepped out of the door now, he'd see the third floor hallway of his family home.

Harry grinned at Ginny, *"This is brilliant, Gin. I could really work in here."*

"We can work in here, Harry. Don't forget. You promised earlier this year that the New Marauders would learn the spells James has been teaching you."

"Oh, yeah, I'm sorry I forgot, Gin, what with the tournament and school."

Ginny gave him a swift kiss, *"Don't worry about it, Harry. You can show it to us as you practice for the Third Task. We can practice them together this summer. Maybe we can use this room next year."*

"Yeah, you're right, we can. Um, we better get back before Ron thinks we're doing more than snogging."

"Oh, all right, Harry," Ginny pouted, *"Just one minute."* She reached up to the back of Harry's head and pulled him down for a searing kiss that lasted more than a minute and left him dazed. *"There, now we can go back."* She giggled at his glazed expression.

"Witch!" Harry said playfully as they left and headed back to the common room, still under the invisibility cloak.

After that, Harry came back to the room with Ginny every evening for an hour or two to practice his spell casting. The others came with them as often as they could but with final exams fast approaching, they stopped coming with them. Finally, after two and a half weeks, Harry had to stop practicing so he could also study for the finals. He was now regretful that he had refused the exam exemption he was entitled to as a Triwizard Champion.

Fortunately, several days and nights of hard studying, including the weekend, allowed him to catch up. The week of exams passed quickly with his last exam held on the day before the Third task. Harry hoped he had passed all his exams as he went to bed that night. He wouldn't want to have survived the tournament only to fail in school.

Harry was awakened the next day by a gentle mental nudge from Ginny.

"Harry, love, wake up. You need to have a good breakfast for this."

"But the task isn't until tonight, Gin," he grumbled back at her.

"I know, Harry, but remember that Dumbledore said yesterday that the Champions' families had been invited to watch the task and would be here after breakfast."

Harry shot out of his bed like a cannon ball, eager to see his parents. He hoped that they'd bring Daisy and Andrew but thought that they'd probably leave them with the Weasleys.

After a quick shower, he met Ginny in the common room and they headed for the Great Hall. Once they were at the Gryffindor table, Harry found himself picking at his food in his nervousness over the task.

Ginny sensed his mood and squeezed his hand gently under the table.

"Relax, Harry," she said to him in his mind, *"You'll do fine. You've practiced those spells enough to do them in your sleep."*

"I know, Gin. I just can't stand the waiting."

Ginny started running her fingers gently over his knuckles. This calmed Harry down and he dug into his food.

As he drank the last of his pumpkin juice, McGonagall approached him and said, "Potter, the champions' families are waiting in the side room to the Great Hall."

Harry nodded to her. He turned and saw the other champions get up from their places and walk toward the door to the side room where they had first gathered after the Goblet of Fire had chosen them.

As he got up from the table, Harry gave Ginny a quick kiss on the lip and Rose a peck on the cheek to wish them luck. They still had one exam that morning, so they couldn't go with him now.

Harry entered the side room. He saw Fleur to one side, talking to an older and more stunning version of herself, with Gabrielle holding the woman's hand. Viktor was on the other side, conversing with the woman he had rescued from the dragon during the first task and an older man, whom Harry assumed was his father.

Harry looked around the room for his parents and was surprised by whom he saw near the fireplace. Not only were his parents there but so were Molly, Arthur and Bill. He felt Ginny pause momentarily at the door of her classroom as she saw her parents and brother through Harry's eyes. Harry walked up to his parents and hugged them both.

"Sirius and Sam are babysitting the twins, Harry," James said, "Remus couldn't come for the meeting but promises to be there this evening."

"That's okay, Dad," Harry said, "I was hoping to see Daisy and Andy but I guess they aren't ready yet for Hogwarts."

He then turned to the Weasleys.

"I'm so glad you guys are here," Harry said to them, smiling, "Ginny, Ron, Fred and George will be glad to see you."

"We're glad to be here, Harry, dear," Molly whispered as she hugged him, "after all, we have to support our future son-in-law." Harry grinned at that and felt Ginny's own elation over her mother's statement. Harry then shook hands with Arthur and Bill.

He turned to the oldest Weasley brother, "I thought you couldn't get off work in Egypt anymore."

"I wouldn't if I was still working there," Bill said, "but Gringott's decided it needed a crack cursebreaker here starting next month, so I was able to get a little headstart on moving back here."

"That's great," Harry said, grinning.

Just then, Fleur came up to them, with a smile on her face, "Oh, 'arry, iz theez your family?" the part-Veela asked.

Harry returned her smile, "Yes, Fleur. You saw my Dad and Mum after the Second task. These are Ginny's parents, Molly and Arthur and her eldest brother, Bill."

Fleur greeted them, shaking their hands. It seemed her smile brightened a bit as she shook Bill's hand.

Harry noticed Bill following her with his eyes, as she walked back to her mother and sister, a strange look on her face. Harry caught Bill's eyes with his own and raised an eyebrow.

Bill shrugged and said, "Hey, she's beautiful, all right?"

Harry just shook his head. He led them out of the side room and the Great Hall, out into the grounds.

They spent the morning walking around, listening to tales of the older ones of their time in Hogwarts. Molly and Arthur were fascinated by the Whomping Willow, which had been planted after their time, especially since they knew the reason why it had been planted.

They returned to the Great Hall for lunch. Ginny and Rose greeted their parents with hugs and the Potters and Weasleys settled down to eat together at the Gryffindor table. Harry felt like it was another one of their family gatherings again, erasing his worries of the coming task.

After lunch, they took another long walk around the grounds, this time accompanied by the rest of the New Marauders. Neville was intrigued by a few stories about his parents from James and Lily.

Evening soon arrived and they made their way back to the Great Hall. James, Lily, Molly, Arthur and Bill again sat at the Gryffindor table. Harry's nervousness returned as they had a dinner of several courses. Ginny did her best to comfort and calm him down.

Finally, Dumbledore rose from the high table where the staff and all the judges were seated. The Headmaster cleared his throat and did a sonorous spell.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in five minutes, we will go down to the Quidditch Pitch for the last task of the Triwizard Tournament. In the meantime, I'd like the three Champions to please follow Mr. Bagman down to the stadium for some last minute instructions."

James turned to Harry and gave him a big hug, "Good luck, son. Remember, I won't think any less of you if you don't win. Just be careful, okay?"

Harry returned the hug willingly, not minding any stares from the other students, "Thanks, Dad. I'll try. Merlin knows I've practiced those spells enough to do them in my sleep."

Harry, Fleur and Viktor walked in silence behind Bagman down to the Quidditch Pitch. Harry went through the spells he had been practicing in his mind as his nerves continued to plague him.

As they approached the Pitch, they noted with apprehension that the edge was surrounded by a twenty-foot high hedge. There was a break in the hedge forming the entrance to the maze. The passage beyond it looked foreboding and menacing.

Soon, the stands of the stadium filled up with students. Harry saw his family and friends take their seats at the top of the stands. Ginny sat between Molly and Lily with Bill to Molly's left. Rose was on her mother's right and James to her right. Remus was sitting at James' right with Ron, Hermione, the twins, Ti and Neville to their right.

Harry wondered why they were so far up in the stands but dismissed that thought as he felt calming and soothing thoughts coming to him from Ginny, easing his nervousness.

Professor McGonagall came through the stadium's entrance with Hagrid, Professor Moody and Professor Flitwick and informed the champions that they would be patrolling the edge of the maze in case of an emergency. A blast of red sparks into the air would be the signal in that case.

Bagman gave a speech that recapped the champions' standings and the order in which they would enter the maze – Harry first, followed by Viktor after five minutes then by Fleur after another five minutes.

Bagman then blew on his whistle, signaling to Harry that he should enter the maze.

Harry took a deep breath and strode forward into the dark passageway. He noticed that the noise from the crowd had vanished. Harry drew his wand and said, "*Lumos!*"

About fifty yards into the maze, the path split into two. Harry decided to go to the left. Then he heard Bagman's whistle in the distance, signaling Viktor's entry into the maze. Harry picked up his pace.

The path started to turn left and then right every ten feet. He came to another fork. He muttered, "*Point me,*" as he held his wand flat on his palm. The wand spun once then pointed to his right, through solid hedge. If that was north, he needed to go toward the east where the exit was located. Harry turned left.

Then as he came around the corner, he saw a ten-foot long creature that resembled a very pale and slimy-looking deformed scorpion with its long stinger hanging over its back. It was about twenty feet in front of him.

"Bugger," he muttered, "one of Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts." It was larger than any of the ones had tended with armor all over it. Just then, sparks flew from the creature's end and it sped toward him.

Harry yelled, "*Impedimenta!*" but the spell bounced off its armored shell. "*Stupefy!*" he yelled but the spell again rebounded off the creature's hide. Concentrating hard, he again yelled, "*Impedimenta!*"

This time, the spell slowed it down a bit. Harry dodged a spark that flew at him.

“IMPEDIMENTA!” he yelled again. The Skrewt stopped moving this time.

Knowing the spell wouldn't last long, Harry immediately ran back the way he had come and took the other path.

After ten more feet, the path turned again. Harry's eyes widened as he came around the corner. Twenty feet in front of him was a large mountain troll, even bigger than the one he, Ron and Hermione had fought in their First Year. He felt a surge of fear from Ginny that doubled his own.

The troll advanced on him, lifting its club above its head, roaring loudly. Harry tried a stinging hex but it bounce off its skin. Then it was upon him, swinging the club down.

Harry dodged to his left and felt the rush of air as the club smashed into the ground beside him. He sent a slashing curse at it, causing a bleeding wound on its chest. The troll roared and swung its club at Harry's head. Harry dropped into a roll and came up behind the troll.

He sent another slashing curse at its back which didn't even cause it to pause as it spun around. The troll swung its club again. This time, as Harry dodged, the club managed to clip him on his left shoulder, pushing him down to the ground. Harry immediately rolled away and felt the club smash into spot he had just been in. He felt Ginny's alarm and fear increase dramatically.

“Harry!” he heard her call through their bond, *“try doing what Ron did to that troll in your first year.”*

Harry jumped to his feet and shouted, *“Wingardium Leviosa!”* as he pointed his wand at the troll's club. The club was wrenched from the troll's hand. Harry maneuvered it above the creature's head as it stared in confusion at the levitating weapon. Then, Harry cancelled the spell and it dropped down on the troll's head before landing on the ground.

The massive creature bent down to pick it then it toppled over and lay still. Harry backed away from it slowly in case it woke up before he had gotten far. Harry turned around only when he felt the hedge at his back. He then ran to put more distance between him and the troll.

The path was much darker now as the sky had turned grey and then black with the approach of night. Harry did the Four-Point spell again. He took a left at the next fork followed a right. Then, as he turned the corner, he saw a Dementor coming at him.

Harry felt the clammy coldness as the twelve foot high creature advanced on him. He summoned the happiest thoughts he could think of, concentrating on his memories of his parents and Ginny, thinking about celebrating with them after the tournament was over.

"Expecto Patronum," he bellowed and a very bright silver stag flew out of his wand. It charged the Dementor and it fell back. The silver stag charged again and rammed right into the Dementor, causing it to dissipate with a horrible, eerie shriek.

Harry's eyes widened and he felt Ginny's shock as well. They had never heard of a Patronus dissolving a Dementor before.

"Wow, Harry. What happened?" Ginny asked in his mind.

"I-I-I don't know, Gin," he replied, *"it just disappeared, instead of running away. I'll ask Dumbledore about it after this is over. I better get moving now. Don't tell anyone yet about this, not even my parents."*

"All right, Harry. Just be careful. I love you."

"I will, Ginny. I love you, too."

Harry continued down the path. He turned left then right then left again. Suddenly, a scream cut through the silence.

"Fleur," Harry shouted. What had happened to her? The scream seemed to come from his right and not far away. Harry ran in the direction of the scream. He was running so fast that before he knew it,

he was plunging into a strange mist. Then the world turned upside down.

His feet seemed to somehow be stuck to the grass which was now the ceiling. The endless sky was below him and he had the sensation of falling into that blackness illuminated by countless stars. His glasses were on the edge of his nose and Harry pushed them back up the bridge of his nose. In the back of his mind, he felt Ginny's amusement at his predicament.

"Ha, ha, right, go on and laugh at me, Ginevra," he said to her mentally.

"I'm sorry Harry, but I can just imagine how you look right now if I was there beside you."

"Very funny, now let me think about a way out of this. I've never heard of an anti-gravity spell before. How do I counteract this?"

As he felt the blood rush down to his head, Harry went through the spells and hexes he had learned from his father, Dumbledore and Moody. None of them seemed to apply to this situation, until he remembered a spell Dumbledore had taught him and Ginny which was useful for removing toxic gases from the vicinity.

"Aero Purgo!" he yelled.

A strong gust of wind blew through the area, dissipating the golden mist. Harry then fell to his knees. Breathing deeply to clear his head, Harry shakily got to his feet. A few more deep breaths and he strode forward again.

He couldn't hear any more screams. He was sure it was Fleur and wondered again what had happened.

"We're not sure, either, Harry," Ginny said in his mind, *"There were no red sparks, so we can only assume she's all right. By the way, your Dad is proud of the way you dealt with that anti-gravity mist. He says it's a novel use for that spell."*

"Err, you've told them about that part?" he asked her.

“Yes, Harry. I’ve been keeping them updated on your progress. That’s the reason we’re so far up in the stands. We don’t want anyone to overhear me and wonder how I know what’s happening to you.”

“All right, Ginny. Thanks for doing that. I know I’d be going out of my mind if you were in my place and I could only watch and wait.”

“You’re welcome, love. Now get on with it and get to that exit first.”

“Yes, *ma’am!*” Harry said to her, grinning at her commanding tone, which sounded a lot like her mother.

Harry came to another fork. He did the Four-Point spell again which pointed to his left so he turned left and found himself at a dead end. He backtracked to the fork and turned right, even if it took him away from the edge.

He came to a dead-end twice more, forcing him to backtrack again. Then as he stepped into another path, he saw a huge shadow in front of him. It was a huge Acromantula. Before he could fire a spell, it lunged at him.

Harry dodged to one side and rolled forward, under the beast. He came up behind it and got to his feet. *“Impedimenta!”* he yelled. The beam of his spell hit the beast, pushing it back slightly. The spider gave its head a shake and scuttled up toward him.

Harry sent another impediment spell which didn’t slow it down one bit. He then tried a jelly legs curse but got only the rear legs which barely impeded its movement. He sent a cutting curse at its body which dug deeply into it, momentarily stunning it.

Harry turned to run. He had gotten only a few feet when he felt something sticky hit his feet and he went down. He looked at his feet and found them surrounded by webs. The spider advanced menacingly toward him.

Harry tried to rip the webs apart but they were too sticky. Then the spider was upon him, pushing him to the ground with two of its feet

and pinning his upper arms. Its pincers came down toward him, clicking together.

Harry dodged with his upper body to the left then to the right. The spider then used two more legs to pin his shoulders. Harry could see the greenish glint of the poison on its large fangs as they descended toward him.

Harry managed to raise his hand slightly and aimed at the spider's belly as the fangs hovered mere inches from his face. *"Reducto!"*

The spider flew off of him and landed with a crash on the hedge, twenty feet away.

Harry frantically attempted to tear the webs on his feet again. He was aware of Ginny's panic and distress in the back of his mind but couldn't allow that to distract him.

Finally, he said, *"Incendio!"* and flames appeared in the webs, burning them away. As soon as he could, Harry got to his feet and stamped around to put out the flames before they consumed his trainers. He saw the spider getting on its feet again.

He sent a cutting curse at one of its legs which was severed from its body. He sent five more at different legs, reducing its movement significantly. Finally, he yelled, *"STUPEFY!"* twice in rapid succession and was rewarded by the sight of the spider falling unconsciousness.

He leaned back against the hedge for a few moments, catching his breath. His shoulders were aching from the pressure of the spider, in addition to the bruise caused by the troll's club earlier. He was dimly aware that Ginny was now sobbing against her mother.

"Shh, it's all right, Gin. I'm fine now."

"No, you're not. Your shoulders are aching and you're exhausted, Harry."

"I'll be okay in a minute. I just need to catch my breath. From the looks of it, I'm near the other side now."

Ginny sniffed and stopped crying, *"I'm sorry Harry for being so girly. I can't help it. When I saw those fangs coming down toward you, I thought I was going to lose you."*

"That won't happen, Ginny. I won't let it, especially in this tournament. Okay, I better get moving. See you in a bit."

Harry started walking again. Finally, he saw a light at the end of path. Twenty feet ahead was the break in the outer hedge which was the exit from the maze. He could barely make out the five judges standing beyond.

He stepped out into an open space just short of the exit. At the same time, Fleur came out of a path to his left and Viktor came into view on his right. Both looked a bit disheveled but not as bad as Harry probably looked.

Viktor gave a low whistle, "Vot happened to you, Harry? You look like hell."

Harry shrugged, "I ran into a few of those obstacles, like a Dementor, a troll, an Acromantula and a mist that turned me upside-down. It got a bit hairy there for a while especially with the spider but I got through. What did you guys meet?"

"I only met a couple of things," Viktor said, "a Boggart and the large spider. Mostly, it was just all the twists and turns of the path that delayed me."

"It waz ze same with me," Fleur said, "I found zis Sphinx which gave me a riddle to solve, zen the Boggart and a Dementor. But ozer zan zat, I got lost a bit."

"That's just my luck," Harry said, smiling, "I ran into more things than you two did. I had to be the one to do a lot of spells. It's a good thing I practiced a lot over the last few weeks." He paused and looked toward the exit, "So, how do you guys want to do this?"

"Shall ve race?" Viktor asked.

“No,” Fleur said, “why don’t we jez walk out togezer? We came out here at the same time.”

“I agree,” Viktor said, “It is only fair.”

“But guys,” Harry said, “if we do it that way, I’ll win since I have the most points.”

“So vot, Harry?” Viktor said, “It doesn’t matter anymore. Doing what is right and fair is more important. We came out from the main maze at the same time.”

“I agree vit Viktor, ‘arry,” Fleur said, “We have become friends of a sort during zis tournament. Zat iz more important zan any old trophy.”

Harry sighed then smiled, “I see I’m not going to change your minds on this. Okay, let’s link arms then and walk out together.”

The three champions linked arms, Fleur in the middle of the two boys, and strode forward through the exit. Harry edged back a bit as they crossed the opening into the brightly lit area in front of the stands.

Wild cheering and applause greeted them. The judges’ faces showed different reactions to the outcome. Madame Maxime and Propanov both had frowns on their faces, the latter with more of a scowl. Dumbledore’s face looked calm and impassive though the familiar twinkle could be seen in his eyes. Bagman looked confused. But the strangest reaction was seen on Mr. Crouch’s face. He seemed furious and upset at the same time.

Bagman got up slowly and said, “Well, we have bit of a dilemma here. It seems our three champions have exited the maze at the same time. We have to decide whether to split the points evenly or give them all full marks. Judges, we better confer at the side.” He led them off toward a spot at the side of the stadium.

Before joining them, Dumbledore approached the three champions and conjured three comfortable chairs, “Please sit down. You three looked tired already.”

“Thank you, professor,” all three replied.

They all sat down and relaxed. They could see their friends fidgeting in their seats, anxious to join them. After twenty minutes, the judges came back.

Bagman looked a bit uneasy, while Crouch looked calm. Dumbledore was smiling while Propanov and Madame Maxime had neutral expressions on their faces.

“*Sonorus!*” Bagman said, “Ladies and gentlemen, as you have probably guessed, with all three champions coming out of the maze at the same time, we have a problem as to how much points to award to each. However, we have viewed several angles of the action. It appears that as they exited the maze, Harry Potter and Viktor Krum allowed Miss DelaCour to precede them and Mr. Potter allowed Mr. Krum to precede him. As such, the points awarded are the following. To Ms. Delacour, 50 points, to Mr. Krum, 49 points and finally, Mr. Potter is awarded 48 points. Tallying the totals together, we have a three way tie at the end of the tournament. We, therefore, declare all three as co-champions!”

A loud cheer rose in the air from the students of all three schools.

“We will have the awarding ceremony here right now.” Bagman continued, “The 10,000 galleon prize money will be split between the three of them and each school will receive the honor of having a replica of the Triwizard Cup in their respective Awards Cabinet. For now, each champion will have the privilege of holding up the real Cup for their schoolmates to see. Mr.Crouch has asked for the honor of handing the Cup to each champion.”

Bagman had the three champions line up, with Fleur immediately to Crouch’s right, followed by Viktor and then Harry.

Crouch handed Fleur the Cup and she raised it up. The other students from Beauxbatons clapped and cheered. Crouch did the same with Viktor and the students from Durmstrang also cheered, a few of them very loudly.

Finally, Crouch came up to Harry, “Ah, Mr. Potter, our youngest champion.” He handed the Cup to Harry but didn’t let go, “I know someone who would like to congratulate your win. *Morsmorde!*”

In that instant, Harry felt a jerk somewhere behind his navel. “*Oh no, a portkey!*” he thought. He found that he couldn’t let go of the Cup which was pulling him onward in a swirl of colors and howling wind. He gulped and wondered where he and Crouch were going.

Chapter 56: Confrontation

Disclaimer: Rose, Andrew and Daisy Potter, Daniel Granger, Maggie Longbottom and Ti Malfoy/Black are my own creations. Everything else is part of the wonderful work of JKR and is not being used for any personal profit.

On the Quidditch pitch of Hogwarts, chaos erupted as Harry and Mr. Crouch vanished before everyone's eyes. Screams and cries erupted from the stands. The Weasleys and Potters all jumped to their feet. James and Remus leaped to the stairs and descended two steps at a time.

When they got to the judges, Dumbledore was waving his wand over the spot Harry and Mr. Crouch had been standing in, Mad-Eye Moody at his side.

"What the bloody hell happened, Albus?" James yelled. "Where did Crouch take my son?"

Dumbledore sighed, "I don't know, James. All we are sure of is that the Cup was some sort of portkey. Who knows where it took them."

"One thing's for sure," Moody said, waving his own wand over the area, "it didn't take them anywhere within a hundred miles of here. The portkey detection spell can't find them." This was a spell the Aurors used to detect the destination of a portkey but it only had a limited range.

"Why did Crouch do that," Remus asked. "What purpose would he have for taking Harry?"

"Did you hear what he said to activate the cup-portkey," Moody asked. "It was 'Morsmorde', the incantation for conjuring the Dark Mark. I'll bet he took him to Voldemort."

James and Remus paled. They heard some noise behind them and turned to find the rest of their families approaching them.

"Albus," Lily shouted as she came up to the Headmaster, "this is the last straw. You said there was no way Harry could get into this bloody

tournament. Then you said he'd be safe during the tasks even if he faced dragons, Grindylows, trolls and acromatulas. Now my son has disappeared from right in front of you." Lily was now trembling as she stood in front of Dumbledore, waving her wand and screaming, "YOU GET HIM BACK, ALBUS OR I'LL HEX YOU SO BAD, MINERVA WILL NEED TO TAKE OVER THE SCHOOL!" Lily suddenly turned to James who had come up behind her and collapsed sobbing into his arms.

"How the hell are we going to find him, Albus?" James demanded as he held on to his crying wife.

Dumbledore sighed. He'd been silent through Lily's tirade as he thought about the situation. "There is one way. Have you forgotten that your son has a bond with a pretty little redhead?"

"Ginny," James cried, "Of course! They can see through each other's eyes." He turned around to the mentioned girl. He felt a wrench in his heart as he saw the pale and tear-streaked face of his son's soul mate. He knelt down in front of her.

"Ginny," James said softly, "You can see through Harry's eyes. Can you tell us where he is?"

Ginny shook her head, tears continuing to flow down her cheeks, "N-N-No, James, I think he's been stunned. I felt the pull of the portkey through Harry but as soon as his feet hit the ground, his vision went black. I haven't been able to talk to him since."

James paled and he took a deep breath as he asked something he dreaded to hear the answer of. "But he is alive, right?"

Ginny nodded jerkily, "Yes, I can feel him but he's just unconscious and seems so far away."

James blew out a breath he had been holding. He turned towards Dumbledore. "Now what, Albus, what do we do?"

Dumbledore sighed again, "There isn't much we can do, James, until we know where he is. We can't Apparate all over Britain looking for

him. We'll have to wait for him to awaken so Ginny can find out where he is."

"In that case," James said, "I'd better contact Sirius. He'll want to help us." He looked down at Lily who was still sobbing within his arms, "Lils, I have to go tell Sirius what happened. He'll be able to help once we find out where Harry is."

Lily nodded jerkily and stepped away from him.

"Come with me, James," Moody said, "My fireplace is secure enough for you to contact Sirius." James thanked his former mentor and the two men walked briskly towards castle.

Dumbledore turned to McGonagall, "Minerva, I think it is best if we send the students and the rest of the staff back to the castle. Please attend to it."

McGonagall nodded and turned to address the students.

Lily turned away from her and looked around at the remaining people milling about the pitch.

Madame Maxime was off to the side, talking with Hagrid. Propanov was still sitting at the judges' table, looking uninterested. Molly was holding Ginny tightly; tears of her own flowing down her cheeks while Arthur stood behind her, his arms encircling his wife and daughter. Bill was standing with his twin brothers to one side, talking with Fleur and Viktor Krum. Ron was awkwardly holding Hermione in his arms, looks of concern on their faces. Rose was standing alone, with a dazed look on her face.

Lily walked up to her daughter, "Rose, dear, are you all right?" Rose shook her head violently from side to side then burst into tears.

"Shh," Lily said, as she embraced Rose tightly, "It's going to be all right. We'll find Harry and get him back."

In their worry over Harry, the group barely noticed the rest of the students leave the pitch. Ginny did notice Dumbledore talk for a moment with Professor Snape who was rubbing his left arm before

the Potions Master left in the direction of Hogsmeade. Ginny found this a bit strange but her worry over Harry pushed it out of her mind.

Madame Pomfrey came over to take the other two champions to the hospital wing to patch up from their various bruises and injuries sustained during the Task. Fleur and Viktor promised to be back for any news on Harry. The remaining people stayed where they were, fretting over Harry in their own way.

After a few minutes of being comforted by her mother, Rose said, "I've failed my brother." Her voice was slightly muffled since her face was pressed against her mother's neck. She was already almost as tall as Lily.

"Whatever makes you say that, Rose?" Lily inquired still holding her tightly against her.

"I didn't see any of this happening, Mum," she replied. "I saw the dragon and the squid, even bits about the Ball, but I didn't have any vision of Harry being whisked away. What use is my being a seer if I can't see something like this before it happens?"

"Oh, my dear," Lily said, tightening her embrace, "right now, your ability to see the future is not something you can turn on and off. It may come at any time. You can't control when the visions come to you."

She gently lifted Rose's chin with one forefinger so she could look into her eyes. "Don't blame yourself for this just because you had no warning it would happen. The ones responsible are Crouch and whoever had him take Harry away, not you."

After a few moments, Rose nodded and leaned her head again against Lily's neck.

Suddenly, Ginny moved out of her mother's arms. "Something's different. I think Harry's starting to wake up." She closed her eyes and concentrated on talking to Harry in her mind.

"Harry," she called out to him in his mind, "Harry, please wake up. Oh, please. We need to find out where you are." Slowly, Ginny felt him arouse.

"Gin?" he answered her in her mind groggily. *"What happened? What's going on?"*

"You've been kidnapped by Mr. Crouch, Harry," Ginny said. *"He used the Triwizard Cup as a portkey. Open your eyes, love. We need to see where you are so we can come and get you."*

As Harry opened his eyes, Ginny saw through them. Mr. Crouch was standing with his back to Harry, in front of a small fire, pointing his wand to his left arm. Harry tried to move but found that he was tied tightly in a standing position to a large headstone. He could still move his head a bit and took the opportunity to take a look around.

They appeared to be in a dark, old graveyard judging from the worn headstones and untended grounds. The dark outline of a small church could be seen over to the right and a hill to the left. The mountains surrounding Hogwarts were absent, leading him to believe that the graveyard was hundreds of miles from the school.

Harry felt a chill run up his spine as he recognized the place, *"Gin, this is where I saw Lucius Malfoy and that other man with Madame Bones that night after our first Valentine date. This is the graveyard where they brought Voldemort back. Tell Dumbledore it's where Riddle's father is buried."*

As he felt Ginny tell the people around her where he was, Harry turned his attention back to Mr. Crouch. "What the bloody hell is going on? Where are we? Why have you brought me here?"

Harry's scar suddenly exploded in a searing pain that was the worst he had ever felt. He felt Ginny gasp as she felt a twinge of the pain through their Bond. A high, cold voice from behind him answered Harry, a voice he had only heard before in his nightmares, "You are here on my orders, Harry Potter."

Through his pain, he heard Mr. Crouch say, "M-m-my Lord."

“Well, Barty,” the same voice said, becoming louder as the speaker drew closer. “You have finally done something right. I must welcome our guest.”

The pain in Harry’s scar subsided to a bearable throbbing as a figure in black robes came into Harry’s line of sight, his face shrouded by a hood, and stopped in front of Mr. Crouch. The man lifted long, slender fingers to pull the hood down, revealing his face.

Harry gasped involuntarily at the sight of face and felt Ginny gasp as well. It was a face Harry had seen only in his nightmares – a face whiter than a skull, with wide scarlet eyes and a nose as flat as a snake with slits for nostrils – the face of Lord Voldemort.

Dimly, through the haze of pain, Harry was aware of other robed figures nearby, figures wearing white masks. He couldn’t tell how many there were.

Voldemort smiled evilly as he looked at Harry’s bound form. “Finally, Harry Potter, we meet again face to face. It’s been so long since that night we first met. I see you have grown to look like your father, though I believe you have your mother’s eyes. And how are they? I should have killed them that night but I was more interested in you. But it doesn’t do to regret past mistakes. Now that I am whole, I aim to correct those mistakes but that is for later. Right now, it is you who I am interested in.”

Harry gritted his teeth as the pain in his scar increased in intensity. He could feel Ginny’s anger directed at the man who had been the boy who had tormented her in her first year through the diary.

“Now, as to where we are,” Voldemort continued, his voice low so only Harry could hear him, “this is the graveyard where my mother is buried and where my father,” he said the word with contempt, “is also buried. In fact, you are tied to his tombstone. In death, he has served me as well as the one who brought you to me.”

Voldemort turned to Mr. Crouch who now looked a bit different to Harry.

Harry's eyes widened as Mr. Crouch's face changed to a much younger version with a maniacal look in his eyes. It was the face of the other man from his dream two years before, the man who had helped Lucius Malfoy bring Voldemort back.

Voldemort laughed at the look on Harry's face, a cold and very evil laugh. "Surprised, Harry? Let me introduce you to my faithful servant, Barty Crouch, Jr. Using Polyjuice, he was able to impersonate his father and enchant the Goblet of Fire with a lovely Dark spell I found which made sure your name came out as the Hogwarts champion. And as to why you are here, well, there are two reasons why I wanted you here. The first reason is tied to the reason why I tried to kill you all those years ago."

Voldemort leaned closer to Harry as he spoke softly again, "You see, Harry, there was a prophecy made before you were born, one I believe was talking about you and me. One of my Death Eaters happened to hear part of it. Unfortunately, he was chased away before he heard the whole thing. I want to know the rest of it. I think that old fool Dumbledore may have told you about it by now. If so, then I intend take it from your mind."

When Ginny heard Voldemort's words, she ran up to Dumbledore. "Professor! Tom's with Harry. He's going to try to get the Prophecy from Harry's mind."

Dumbledore frowned, "I see. That would not be good. Let us hope he remembers what I have taught him in our lessons on Occlumency. Have no fear, my dear. We'll get him back."

When he noted the pained look on her face, his frown deepened. "Is there something else? It seems you're in pain."

Ginny's voice was breaking and tears were flowing down her cheeks as she answered, "His scar is burning again, Professor. With Voldemort so close to him, it's like it's on fire. I can feel it a bit through our Bond."

Suddenly, she fell to her knees, clutching her head, "He's trying to break into Harry's mind. Voldemort's trying to get inside his head. It's

like one of those huge trucks the Muggles drive around trying to smash its way in.”

Arthur and Molly rushed to their daughter’s side. Molly pulled Ginny into her arms, cradling her.

Just then, James came running up with Sirius, Remus and Moody. “What is it?” James asked when he saw the scene, “What’s happened? What’s wrong with Ginny?”

“I’m afraid Voldemort is using a very brutal form of Legilimency on Harry and Ginny is feeling it through their Bond,” Dumbledore answered in a very low voice, “We must hurry, James.”

“I’m coming with you,” Arthur said, getting up from his place beside Molly and Ginny.

“Arthur, no,” Molly cried as she continued to hug Ginny tightly.

“I need to go, Molly,” Arthur said, gently. “There’s no way I’m staying here while my future son-in-law is in danger.” Ginny lifted her head up to look at her father with a trembling smile.

“All right, Arthur,” James said, giving him a brief smile, “Just stay with Remus, behind me, Sirius and Mad-Eye. You’re not trained for something like this.”

“I want to come too, Dad,” Ginny said, gently pushing her mother aside and getting up.

“No!” her mother cried, “You can’t go, Ginny. It’s too dangerous.”

Ginny whirled on her, “Dangerous, Mum? I don’t care! Harry is out there with Voldemort. Like Dad said, there’s no way I’m staying here while my soulmate and future husband is fighting for his life!”

Everyone stared at her silently with various reactions ranging from concern, surprise, amusement and pride.

Dumbledore broke the silence as he said, “I’m sorry, Ginevra, but I can’t allow you to come with us.”

“Please, Professor,” Ginny begged, ignoring his use of her hated given name. “I can’t stay here, not while I can feel everything he’s going through. I can help. From what I could see through Harry, Voldemort has got some of his Death Eaters with him. You could use another wand. I was with Harry for the past four weeks when he was training for the task and I know all the spells he trained with. I can’t sit here, waiting. Please, let me come with you.”

Dumbledore sighed and looked at her parents.

Molly was shaking her head, tears starting to flow down her cheeks. Arthur sighed and turned to Molly. Placing his hands gently on her shoulder, he talked to her softly for a few moments. She glanced at Ginny for a moment then looked at the ground. She gave a barely noticeable nod of her head then buried her head in her hands, sobbing. Arthur embraced her tightly for a few seconds then released her.

“I’m coming as well,” Bill said, coming up to stand beside his father, “You may have need of a good cursebreaker.”

“Glad to have you aboard, Bill,” James said.

The other teens then started asking to come along, especially Ron, Hermione and Rose.

“No,” Dumbledore said, “none of you know as many spells as Ginevra does. Please remain here. We will be back shortly with Harry safe and sound.”

Seeing the teens subside, he turned to the others who would be part of the rescue team as he drew a long ruler from his robes.

Muttering “*Portus*” softly, he watched the ruler turn blue for a few moments. “All right, James, Remus, Sirius, Alastor, Arthur, Bill and Ginny, take a hold of the portkey. It will take us to the edge of the village of Little Hangleton, which is where Harry and Tom are.”

The seven adults and single teen placed a hand on the ruler. Two seconds later, they felt the pull at the navel as the portkey activated, sending them to Harry’s location.

Meanwhile, Harry was concentrating with all his might as Voldemort assaulted his mind with sledgehammer blows, attempting to gain entrance. His need to block Voldemort kept him from noticing what was happening on the Quidditch Pitch.

Dumbledore had taught him and Ginny how to build barriers around their minds to protect it from intrusion. Harry had decided to use steel plates like those used for Muggle battleships in making his walls, riveted solidly in place all around his mind. Dumbledore had tested them and found them very strong.

Now, those walls faced a real test. As Voldemort attacked Harry's mind, the walls bent and buckled inward. Harry struggled to keep the walls intact. Whenever one part buckled, he concentrated to straighten it. When a rivet popped out, he put up the image of a heavily muscled man in a hard hat with a rivet gun, replacing the lost rivet.

After what seemed like hours, though it was only a few minutes, Voldemort ceased his attack, frustration and anger evident on his face, "You have a strong mind, Potter. Not that it matters. With no one knowing where you are, it will be only a matter of time before I get what I want. No one can resist Lord Voldemort." Grinning evilly, he resumed his attack on Harry's mind.

A couple of miles away, Harry's would-be rescuers arrived on the outskirts of the village. In the light of the half-full moon, they could just make out the cemetery from the tombstones.

As she took a step forward, Ginny stumbled against her father, her hands holding her head. "Tom's attacking Harry's mind again," she said, "I can feel it more strongly now that we're closer. We've got to hurry."

Arthur looked at her with concern. "Are you sure you're up to this, poppit? Will you be able to cast spells with you feeling Harry's pain?"

"I'll be all right, Dad," Ginny replied, "I wasn't ready the first time Tom attacked Harry. Just give me a moment." She closed her eyes and concentrated, bringing up her mental walls which were actually

similar to the ones Harry had. This would allow her to separate most of what Harry was feeling. "Okay, I'm ready to go."

Dumbledore nodded, "Can you tell where Harry is in the graveyard?"

Ginny closed her eyes and concentrated on sensing Harry's presence. "Yes, Professor, he's over to the left, just beyond that large tree, between a church and a hill."

Dumbledore turned to the other adults, "Now, we don't know how many Death Eaters are there with Voldemort. However, it doesn't matter. We aren't here to really fight them but to get Harry out of there."

He turned to James and Sirius, "James, you, Remus and Sirius move to the right. Alastor and I will go to the left. We will distract Voldemort and his Death Eaters and draw them away."

He turned to the Weasleys and Remus. "Arthur, you, Bill, and Ginny wait for 10 minutes then come up in the middle. Once Voldemort and his Death Eaters leave Harry come up and get him. Once you have Harry, Apparate him and Ginny back to Hogwarts. Do not wait for us, understand?"

Arthur nodded, "All right, Albus. We'll get them out safely."

Dumbledore, Alastor, Remus, James and Sirius cast Disillusion charms on themselves then moved in their assigned directions. The others crouched down to wait.

Arthur glanced at Ginny and noticed her slumped shoulders. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "Don't worry, poppit, we'll get him back."

Ginny looked up at him, the unshed tears in her eyes reflecting the moonlight, "I hope so, Daddy. I don't know what I'd do without him."

Arthur pulled her into his arms and rubbed her back, soothing her like he used to do when she was younger.

Bill looked on his father and sister with a little discomfort. He had been told of the Bond between her and Harry and the Prophecy of Trelawney by his parents during Christmas but had little idea of how it affected both of them. To see her in anguish like that over a boy only a year older than she was made him uncomfortable. Yet, having known Harry over the years, he knew the younger boy would take care of her. He hoped that whatever happened in the future, his sister and the Boy-Who-Lived would survive to live together into a ripe old age.

Ginny suddenly gasped. She pulled out of her father's arms and stood up, drawing her wand.

"What is it, Ginny?" Arthur asked as he also stood up and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Tom's angry over being unable to get into Harry's mind," Ginny said, tears starting to flow down her cheeks again. "He's hitting Harry with the *Cruciatus* curse."

Inside the graveyard, Harry gritted his teeth to keep from screaming as the curse Voldemort was casting on him caused all his nerves to feel like they were on fire. His back arched from the pain but the tombstone and his bonds kept him from bending too far back or flailing about.

"That should weaken your will, Potter," Voldemort said grinning as he pointed his wand at the helpless boy.

After several seconds, Voldemort lifted the curse, causing Harry to hang limply from his bonds, breathing heavily as he recovered from the pain.

After a few seconds, he heard Voldemort again yell "*Crucio*" and felt the agony assail his body again.

When Harry again refused to scream, Voldemort grew angrier. He kept the curse on the boy for several more seconds then stopped it. "Enough of this! I really don't need to know the whole Prophecy once you're dead." He turned to Crouch, "Release his bonds and give him back his wand."

"But my Lord...." Crouch began to say.

"Do not question my orders" Voldemort screamed, "or you will feel my wrath along with Potter."

Harry dropped to the ground in a heap as Crouch cut his bonds loose, releasing him from the tombstone. He then tossed Harry's wand to the ground beside the boy.

"Get up, Potter," Voldemort said.

Harry reached for his wand and shakily got to his feet. His muscles ached all over and his scar was still throbbing. Then he felt Ginny's presence nearby.

"Gin? I can feel you nearby." He called out to his mind.

"Shh, Harry, I'm about half a mile away. Dumbledore, our Dads, Sirius, Remus, Bill, Mad-Eye and I are here to rescue you."

"What are you doing here? You shouldn't have come with them. It's too dangerous."

"Don't you treat me like my Mum, Harry! If it wasn't for me, they wouldn't have known where you are. I wasn't staying behind while my soul mate was in Tom's hands."

"But, Ginny," Harry started to say but Ginny interrupted him.

"No buts, Harry. I'm here now and there's nothing you can do about it. Now, Dumbledore, your Dad, Mad-Eye, Sirius and Remus are coming to you from opposite sides. Keep Tom and his Death munchers distracted while they come up. Once they attack, Dad, Bill and I will come to you."

Harry sighed, *"All right, Gin. Please be careful."* He turned his attention back to Voldemort. His mental conversation with Ginny had taken barely five seconds but it seemed that Voldemort and his Death Eaters hadn't noticed his distracted look and probably thought he was simply regaining his breath.

“So, Potter,” Voldemort said, “we come to the other reason I wanted you to be brought to me. It seems that after the events that night I came to your family’s hiding place, there have been rumors that I had passed my peak, especially if I was defeated by a fifteen month old baby! I must dispel those rumors. I must prove that I am still the greatest wizard of all. So, we shall duel.”

He turned to the dozen Death Eaters gathered around them. “No one interfere. Whoever does will join Potter in the grave.”

He turned back to Harry and grinned. “Now, we bow to each other like proper gentlemen,” Voldemort said, bowing at the waist.

Harry mimicked him, keeping his eyes on Voldemort.

As he straightened, Voldemort suddenly shouted, “*Stupefy!*”

Harry barely had time to say, “*Protego!*” Voldemort’s spell hit the shield and rebounded to one side, barely missing a standing Death Eater who cursed as he jumped back. Harry sent a stinging hex at Voldemort which bounced off the villain’s own shield.

“Tut, tut,” Voldemort said, “Too slow, Potter.” He sent two stunner spells in quick succession. Harry’s shield shattered from the first spell, forcing Harry to dodge to one side to avoid the other.

Harry rolled as soon as he hit the ground, just in time. Another red light hit the spot he had been in a mere second ago.

Harry leaped to his feet, firing a cutting curse that shattered Voldemort’s shield, causing the man’s eyes to widen in surprise. Voldemort barely managed to dodge Harry’s next spell.

Furious, Voldemort sent three cutting spells in succession. Harry dodged the first two but the third clipped him on the shoulder, spinning him around to land behind a small tombstone. He crouched behind it, trying to catch his breath. Between the stunner Crouch had hit him with earlier and the effects of two *Cruciatus* curses, he was tiring fast. If he got out of this, he vowed to build up more of his endurance.

“Come now, Potter,” Voldemort called out to him. “Don’t hide behind that tombstone. What will your brave Auror father think, his oldest son hiding from a fight? Come out of there and face me!”

Harry took a deep breath, pushed himself to his feet and stepped out from behind the tombstone, his wand raised.

“Ah, that’s better,” Voldemort said, “Now, I think it’s time to end this. *Avada Kedavra!*”

At the same time, Harry had shouted, “*Expelliarmus!*”

The green light from Voldemort’s wand and the red light from Harry’s sped toward each other and hit each other in a flash of light, connecting the wands with a golden beam.

“What is this?” Voldemort demanded, holding his wand with both hands.

Harry didn’t know what to say but held on to his own wand, knowing somehow that he had to keep their wands connected if he wanted to survive.

Just then, three of the Death Eaters were hit by red lights and crumpled to the ground. The remaining nine looked around in confusion.

Dumbledore stepped out from the darkness, “Hello, Tom. Up to your old tricks again, I see.”

With a mighty wrench, Voldemort tore his wand away from its connection to Harry’s and faced his old professor.

“Do not call me that!” he screamed. “I am Lord Voldemort! That name has no more meaning for me.”

“Ah, but it is the name your mother gave you, Tom,” Dumbledore answered. “It is the name you bore while you were studying at Hogwarts.”

“Bah!” Voldemort yelled, “It doesn’t hold meaning for me anymore!” With that he started casting spells at Dumbledore who dodged as he cast spells back at Voldemort.

At the same time, more stunning spells dropped two more of the Death Eaters. This time, however, the remaining ones saw the direction the spells had come from. Four of them started firing spells that way while two started reviving their stunned comrades.

Soon, spells were flying in both directions. Harry found himself in a duel with Barty Crouch Jr and another Death Eater. He dodged and ducked while firing spells back at them, though they were few and far between.

Suddenly, he heard a familiar sounding female voice yell “*Chiropterus Muccus!*” at Crouch, causing him to go down, screaming and clutching his face as huge green bats came out of his nose. The other Death Eater was distracted enough for Harry to hit him with a stunner, knocking him out cold.

Someone grabbed him and pulled him back. Harry turned around, intent on hexing whoever it was but stopped when he saw that it was Mad-Eye.

Then a blur of red hit him, embracing him tightly. He inhaled deeply, reveling in the smell of strawberries and wild flowers that was Ginny’s familiar scent. He returned her embrace with the same fervor. For a few moments, it was like there were no other people in the world.

Then, Harry felt the presence of other people. Looking up, he saw Bill, Mr. Weasley and Mad-Eye Moody standing beside them, smirks on the Weasley males’ faces and a grin on Mad-Eye’s scarred one.

“Come on, Potter,” Mad-Eye said. “We’ve got to get you out of here.”

“I can’t leave yet!” Harry said, “Not while Dumbledore is out there fighting with Voldemort.” He turned around and saw the two powerful wizards dueling.

They were casting spells in rapid succession at each other. The air was crackling over the power they were displaying. It was a bit

intimidating and Harry was wondering if he would ever have such power.

“Yes, you will,” Ginny said in his mind. “Remember the power revelation spell they cast on us last year, Harry. The light from your magical power was brighter than Dumbledore’s. You just need to train a bit more, then you can kick Tom’s ass true and proper.”

Then, Dumbledore stumbled and fell to the ground. Voldemort grinned triumphantly.

“NO!” Harry yelled. He pulled out of Ginny’s arms and rushed out toward the Headmaster.

Voldemort aimed his wand at the Headmaster. Then he looked up and smiled. Just as he cast the spell, his wand pointed up, straight at Harry. *“Avada Kedavra!”*

Harry was too surprised to move aside or raise his wand as the green light sped toward him. Suddenly, he was pushed down to the ground and someone stepped into the path of the green beam.

Harry looked up and saw Mad-Eye get hit by the green spell. For a moment, he thought the old wizard winked at him before crumpling in a heap at his feet.

Then, the pops of several people Apparating were heard. People dressed in Auror uniforms appeared in the graveyard, more than a dozen of them.

Voldemort snarled and yelled, “Retreat!”

In mere seconds, the still active Death Eaters Disapparated, leaving Harry and his friends in possession of the battlefield.

Chapter 57: After the graveyard

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A bright ray of sunshine fell upon Harry's face, forcing him to blearily open his eyes. He was unsure where he was since his blurred vision prevented him from seeing more than a couple of feet. He did see a table beside his bed with his glasses on it. He sat up, reached out for them and put them on. The room fell sharply into focus and he sighed.

He was in the hospital wing of Hogwarts again. It seemed he had been spending the last days of the term in its sterile environment ever since he started coming here. The clock on the wall said that it was nine in the morning. For a moment he wondered why he was here. Then, the memories of the events in the previous night came back to him, causing him to flop back down on the bed.

He remembered feeling the pull of the Triwizard Cup-turned-portkey before blacking out, then waking up to find himself tied to a tombstone. He remembered Voldemort coming up to him and trying to enter his mind to find the prophecy Dumbledore had told him about the year before. Then he had to duel Voldemort before a rescue party arrived. Then, he remembered with anguish what happened then.

He saw Dumbledore stumble while dueling with Voldemort. He had run toward them, intent on helping the Headmaster. But Voldemort had noticed him and sent the Killing Curse toward him. He had been unable to move away in time but Mad-Eye Moody had pushed down and stood in the path of the green beam, dying in Harry's place. This had shocked Harry.

After Voldemort and the other Death Eaters had Disapparated away upon the arrival of the Aurors, Harry just sat there staring at the body of Moody. The man's magical eye stared back at him, lifeless and still.

Harry didn't remember much after that, a vague memory of his dad gently pulling him to his feet and Ginny wrapping her arms around

him and sobbing against his chest. He wasn't sure how he got back to Hogwarts after that, much less ending up in the hospital wing.

Harry sighed and felt tears gather at the corners of his eyes. One of his favorite DADA professors, his Dad's mentor in Auror training, was dead and it was his fault. He shouldn't have run toward Dumbledore and Voldemort. He had left himself open to attack and Voldemort had taken advantage of it.

Suddenly, the doors of the hospital wing flew open. Harry turned to look and saw Ginny standing there, a look of anguish to match his own on her face. Upon seeing him, she ran up to his bed and engulfed him in a tight embrace, settling her head on his chest.

"Don't you dare blame yourself for that, Harry," she said to him in his mind. "I was there and I saw the whole thing. It wasn't your fault. If Moody had not taken the Curse, you'd be the one dead. Would you do that to me, Harry? Would you leave me like that?"

She looked up at him, tears streaming down her face. It broke Harry's heart to see her like that.

"But, Gin," he answered back in the same manner, "If I hadn't been stupid and run toward Dumbledore, Moody wouldn't have to run after me and take the curse. He'd still be alive."

"Maybe, Harry," she replied, "but then, maybe Dumbledore would be dead. If you hadn't done that and distracted Voldemort, he might have killed Dumbledore."

Feeling a sliver of doubt appear in Harry's mind, Ginny went on, *"But that doesn't matter, Harry. The point is that it's Tom who is at fault. He didn't have to cast the Killing Curse at you. He could have used another one. It's because he chose to cast the Killing curse that Moody is dead, not because you ran toward him. So it's Tom we should blame for Moody's death."*

Harry sighed and kissed her on the forehead, *"How do you know what to say to me to calm me down?"*

Ginny shrugged, *"The Bond lets us know what the other is feeling. I guess knowing you for so long, I can figure out what's going on in your head to cause such feelings and how to handle it so you don't do yourself any harm."*

Harry thought about it for a moment then said, "I'm glad you can." They continued to embrace each other in silence with Ginny's head on Harry's chest and their bodies molding to each other.

"Gin?" Harry said in her mind after a few seconds, *"um, did you really feel the pain when my scar was burning and when Voldemort cast the Cruciatus on me?"*

Ginny's eyes widened in surprise that he would know and it was a couple of seconds before she replied. *"Uh, yes, Harry, I did."* Before Harry could say anything, she continued, *"Don't you dare suggest severing the Bond to spare me the pain, Harry. I won't let you. I don't care about that."*

Harry sighed again. She knew him so well. *"But I don't want you to feel that kind of pain again, Ginny."*

"Well, we'll just have to find a way to get around that. Maybe we should continue our training with Professor Dumbledore in Occlumency?"

"I guess so, Gin. Maybe we can ask him later."

"I think we should do that. Now, hush, you need to rest some more."

Just then, a distinct cough caused them to look up. They saw Madame Pomfrey watching them from a few feet away, the door to her office open behind her.

Ginny quickly got off Harry and they both sat up; their faces turning red with embarrassment at having been seen in such an intimate position.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," the school nurse said, "I see that you are awake." She didn't comment about what she had seen, for which the two

teenagers were extremely grateful. The nurse came up to them and looked critically at Harry.

She turned to Ginny. "Move over, Miss Weasley," she said in a kind voice. "I need to check on Mr. Potter."

Ginny moved to sit at the foot of Harry's bed, taking a hold of one of Harry's hands and clasping it tightly.

Madame Pomfrey waved her wand over Harry for several seconds, lingering over his shoulder where Voldemort had hit him with a cutting curse, his limbs and his ribs. Finally, she said, "All right, Mr. Potter. You seem much better. Those curses didn't do any permanent damage. You just need to drink some potions. I will be right back with them." She headed back into her office.

Then the door of the hospital wing opened again. Harry and Ginny looked up to see Harry's sister and parents enter the room.

No one said anything at first as they walked over to them. Rose sat on the bed next to Harry's. Lily sat down beside Harry and embraced him tightly. James stood behind his wife and son. Ginny remained where she was and continued holding his hand.

After a while, when it appeared his mother wouldn't let him go, Harry said, "Mum, I need to breathe."

Lily pulled back and looked at him intently, "Are you all right? How are you feeling?"

"I just feel a little sore, Mum," he replied, shrugging his shoulder, "but otherwise I feel fine."

"Are you sure?" she asked, "Your father said that that monster used Legilimency on you then hit you twice with the *Cruciatus*, in addition to a cutting curse."

Just then, Madame Pomfrey came out of her office. She was carrying a tray with several vials filled with different colored liquids.

Lily turned to her as she came closer, "How's my son doing, Poppy?" she asked the older woman.

"He's much better now than he was when he arrived here last night, Lily," Madame Pomfrey replied. "He had a deep cut on his shoulder then that I healed. It shouldn't leave even a scar after a few days." Harry breathed a sigh of relief over that, feeling that he already had one scar too many. "He also had some muscle damage in his arms and legs and bruising around the ribs from being exposed to the *Cruciatus* curse. I have a few potions for him to take for that but it will take a few weeks. Other than that, he's well enough to leave later this evening."

Harry brightened up at that. "You mean it, Madame Pomfrey?" he asked, "I can leave the hospital wing later?"

Madame Pomfrey smiled, "Yes, Mr. Potter. You seemed to have recovered well enough. However, you will have to take it easy for a couple of weeks. Being subjected to the *Cruciatus* is a serious thing. It would be best if you don't try any heavy physical activity for the next two weeks."

Harry's eyes widened at that, "Heavy physical activity?"

"Yes," she replied, "things like jumping around, running and flying, especially Quidditch."

Harry's face fell on hearing that. But he consoled himself with the fact that it would be for only a couple of weeks.

"Right now," Madame Pomfrey continued, "I need you to drink these three potions."

"Um, do I really have to?" Harry whined.

"Yes, Mr. Potter," the nurse sternly replied, "that is if you want to leave before dinner. Otherwise, I may have to keep you here for another night."

Harry's eyes widened a bit and he gulped, "Err, in that case, I'll drink the potions."

Madame Pomfrey gave him the vials one after another. Harry grimaced as he downed the different potions, all of them bitter tasting. He caught a whiff of amusement in his mind that he knew was from Ginny, causing him to scowl at her. She grinned back at him. Even Rose looked amused, though Harry thought he saw a dark shadow in her eyes.

Once she had given Harry his potions, Madame Pomfrey said, "All right, Harry, your family can stay for another hour. Then you should get some more rest." With that, she went back to her office.

Harry looked up at his father who looked weary and hadn't said anything yet. "Dad?" he said hesitantly, "I-I-I'm sorry about Moody. I wish he didn't have to run after me."

James sat down on the bed and placed his hand on Harry's shoulder, squeezing it gently, "It wasn't your fault, Harry. Voldemort killed Mad-Eye, not you. It's that monster's fault that Alastor is dead."

"I-I know, Dad," Harry said, softly. "Ginny convinced me of that just a while ago."

"Good," his father said. "I'm glad she settled that for you. Although, if it wasn't for Mad-Eye, you'd be the one dead. I'm sad he's dead, but I'd rather have you alive. I don't care what I have to do or what needs to be done for you to remain alive. I want you and this cutie here," he waved his hand at Ginny, "to marry someday and give me, Lily, Arthur and Molly lots of grandchildren. I want you to live a life once that monster is gone."

Harry felt tears prickling his eyes upon hearing his father's words. His cheeks were also turning crimson from hearing the word 'grandchildren'.

He also felt the same emotions coming from Ginny. She moved over to James and gave him a hug her mother would be proud of. James' eyes widened in surprise but he returned the hug.

Harry smiled as he turned to regard his sister. Now that he studied her more closely, he saw that her smile didn't reach her eyes.

“Rose,” he said to her, “what’s wrong?”

Rose’s lower lip trembled for a moment then she launched herself at Harry, hugging him fiercely. “I’m sorry, Harry. I’m so sorry.” She was crying onto his shoulder now.

Harry’s eyes widened in surprise and alarm. He returned the embrace. “What are you talking about, sis? What are you sorry for?”

She pulled back and looked at him through teary eyes, “I-I-I wasn’t able to w-warn you about being taken by Crouch. I didn’t have any visions of that. I feel like I failed you.”

Harry pulled her back into his arms and started rubbing her back soothingly, “Shhh. It’s all right. Just because you didn’t have a vision doesn’t mean you have anything to feel sorry for. I’m not sure how your seer ability works but I bet you can’t see everything that may happen. This is just one of those things. Don’t worry about it. You didn’t fail me or anyone else.”

Harry felt Ginny’s own alarm and concern lessen with his words. She placed a hand on Rose’s shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze.

“Harry’s right, Rose,” Ginny said gently to her best friend, “It doesn’t matter if you don’t get a vision to warn us about something bad that may happen. If you get a vision, we’ll act on it. If you don’t, we’ll just be ready for anything. So, don’t let that bother you. We know you could never fail us.”

Rose lifted her head from Harry’s shoulder and looked at Ginny, “A-All right.” She sniffed one last time and pulled out of Harry’s arms to sit on the bed.

The doors of the hospital wing opened up once more. When the Potters and Ginny looked there, they saw Dumbledore looking in through the half-open doors.

“Ah, Harry, you’re awake,” the Headmaster said, “I hope you are up to some more visitors who are anxiously waiting to see you.” With that, he pushed the door open and walked inside, leaving the door

open. Behind him followed Ron, Hermione, Neville, Maggie, Ti, Remus, Arthur, Molly, Fred, George and Bill.

Harry grinned widely and said, "Hey, guys!"

Within moments, they were clustered around his bed, greeting him and patting his back. Hermione even gave him a brief hug.

Molly sat beside Lily and engulfed Harry in her arms, "Oh, Harry, dear, we were so worried when you disappeared from the pitch."

"Mum!" Ginny cried, "Let him breathe!"

Molly pulled back, "Sorry dear. I'm just so happy you're back, safe and sound. I wouldn't be able to stand it if anything happened to my future son-in-law."

"Err," Harry said, his cheeks turning red, "Thanks, Molly." He could feel the happiness coming from Ginny over her mother's words. Truth to tell, he felt glad over Molly's acceptance that he and Ginny would be married one day, in spite of his embarrassment over having her say it in front of his parents, sister and friends.

"So, how is he doing?" Molly asked Lily, unaware of his embarrassment or thoughts.

"Well, Molly," Lily said, "According to Poppy, he's much better now than he was when he got here last night. She said he was well enough to leave the hospital wing by dinnertime."

"Hooray!" said Ron, Fred, George, Neville and Ti.

"Boys, really," Molly said to them, a scowl on her face. She turned back to Lily, "That's good to hear. I'm glad he doesn't have to spend more time here. I heard that he seems to always end the year here."

"That he does," Lily said, eyeing her son disapprovingly, "This makes it four times in a row."

"MUM!" Harry whined, "This time, it wasn't my fault."

Lily's face softened. "I know, Harry," she said, as she brushed his hair on his forehead, revealing his scar. "I just wish you could have a normal school year for once."

"I know, Mum, so do I," Harry said as he turned to Remus, "Hey, Remus. Where's Sirius?"

"Oh, I'm sure he'll be along in a while," Remus said, "He went to get one more visitor for you."

Harry wondered who he meant when the doors to the hospital wing opened for the fourth time that morning and Sirius stuck his head in.

"Oh, so this is where everyone is," he said. He came in, followed by Sam.

"Hi, Sirius. Hi, Sam," Harry said, "It's great to see you again, Sam. Where are the twins?"

"We left them with Blinky and Mimi so we could visit you," Sam said.

"So, how did taking care of Andrew and Daisy for a day go?" Lily asked smiling.

"Oh, all right I suppose," Sirius said, "I mean, we didn't have any accidents or problems with them. I figured it would be good practice for us."

"Practice?" James asked, "What do you mean by practice, Padfoot?"

"Well, I guess now's as good a time as any to let you guys know." He turned to Sam who looked at everyone and said, "I'm pregnant."

The girls squealed and, together with the women, rushed to Sam while the men congratulated Sirius with hearty handshakes.

"That's great, Sirius," Harry said, "Of course, I just can't picture you as a dad."

"Hey!" Sirius said, "What do you mean by that? I did okay with you when you were a baby whenever your parents needed to leave you."

"Oh, I don't know, Padfoot," Remus said, a grin on his face, "I remember most of those times and I recall having to come to your rescue. Harry here wasn't the most peaceful of babies. You could say he's the true son of a Marauder."

"This I've got to hear," Ginny said, "I haven't heard any stories of Harry before we met."

"Oh no," Harry said, "No one is telling any stories of me as a baby. I've seen the pictures. I don't need to hear the stories about them." He clamped a hand over his mouth when he realized what he had revealed.

"Pictures?" Ginny said, her eyes widening, "Rose, do you know anything about Harry's baby pictures?"

"Can't say I have, Ginny," Rose said, staring at her brother, "I've never seen pictures of my big bro as a baby, at least from the time before I was born." She turned to James, "Do you have an album of Harry before he turned one, Dad?"

"Yes, Rose," James said, his eyes laughing at Harry's scowl, "We had one but it seemed to have disappeared a few years ago. Now, Harry, you wouldn't happen to know what happened to it now, would you?"

"Err, would 'no' be an acceptable answer?" Harry said, still scowling.

Ginny smirked and closed her eyes. Harry's eyes widened and he realized what she was about to do. He felt her presence in his mind intensify through their bond. He tried to put up his Occlumency shields but it was like they were not an obstacle to her.

She opened her eyes a few seconds later, "It seems my dear soul mate here nicked the album before he came to Hogwarts and hid it." She smirked at him then spoke into his mind, *"Don't worry, love. I'm not telling them where it is and I didn't see anything I shouldn't. You were just thinking about it too hard."*

Everyone laughed as Harry was glowering at Ginny.

At that moment, Madame Pomfrey came out of her office, "What is going on here? I didn't allow all of you in here, only Miss Weasley and the Potters. Mr. Potter still needs his rest."

Dumbledore came up to her and said softly, "I'm sorry, Poppy. It's my fault. I thought seeing his friends and family would cheer Harry up after what happened last night."

Madame Pomfrey looked sternly at Dumbledore for a few seconds then sniffed, "All right, Albus. They can stay for a while but they have to let Harry get some more rest if he intends to leave this room this evening." She looked at Sam and said loudly, "Of course, this gives me a chance to see my dear niece."

Sam came up to Madame Pomfrey and gave her a hug and kiss on the cheek, "Hello, Aunt Poppy. It's so good to see you again."

"And you, my dear," the nurse said, "You look positively radiant. I still can't believe you married Sirius Black. I hope he's been behaving himself." She looked at Sirius, "He was always getting in trouble when they were here."

"Oh, don't worry, Aunt Poppy," Sam said, looking fondly at Sirius, "Lily's been giving me pointers on how to control a Marauder."

"Hey!" Sirius and James cried, "What do you mean by that?"

Sam and Lily exchanged a look and burst out laughing.

"You guys are just so easy to tease," Lily said, in between laughs.

"Ha, ha," James said, "Very funny, Lils."

Harry's stomach suddenly let out a big growl, "Oops, sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Mr. Potter," Madame Pomfrey said. "You haven't had anything to eat since before the task. I noticed you didn't really eat that much then. I will have the house elves bring you something to eat. Then you have to get some more rest. I want everyone to leave now besides the Potters and Miss Weasley. Oh, Samantha, please stay. I'd like to catch up a bit more."

Sam smiled, "Of course, Aunt Poppy."

With that, the rest of the group bid Harry goodbye which included another big hug from Molly.

"Professor," Harry called out to Dumbledore, "Please stay a while. I need to ask you something."

Dumbledore nodded. He conjured a nice chair and sat down beside Harry's bed.

"Err," Harry said, "How are you feeling, Professor? I saw you stumble in your duel with Voldemort. I hope you weren't hurt badly."

"I'm fine, Harry," Dumbledore, "My foot just caught on a root as I dodged one of Voldemort's spells. His spells didn't touch me."

"Um, that's good," Harry said, looking down at his bed. After a moment of silence, he added, "I'm sorry about Professor Moody. When I saw you stumble, I was afraid Voldemort would be able to kill you. I forgot he was more interested in killing me." Harry couldn't suppress completely the feeling of guilt he had over Moody's death in spite of what Ginny and his dad had told him. Ginny felt this and squeezed his hand in sympathy.

"Don't blame yourself, Harry," Dumbledore said, "You acted out of your feelings for me. That is not a bad thing. Moody did the same thing. He had grown quite fond of you these past few months, in spite of his gruff exterior. It was because he cared for you that he took the Killing curse in your stead. Love is a wonderful thing that Voldemort can never understand. It will enable us to win against him in the end."

"Albus is right, Harry," Lily said, "You can't let Moody's death dampen your spirits. That's what Voldemort wants. As long as we have hope and love, we can beat that monster. So, don't let this deter you or harden your heart."

Harry simply nodded, unable to speak as he felt sadness over Moody's death.

A house elf popped in then with a tray containing ham, eggs, bacon, pumpkin juice and bread. Lily and Ginny made sure Harry ate every last bit of food and drained the glass of pumpkin juice to the last drop. This made him sleepy.

Lily rearranged his pillow and drew the blankets over him. She kissed his forehead. "Sleep well, son. Your dad and I will be going home to take care of the twins. We'll see you soon."

James squeezed Harry's shoulder gently, "Yes, we'll see you soon, son."

"Bye, Mum, Dad," Harry said, groggily.

Rose gave him a one-arm hug and a kiss on the cheek, "I'm so glad you're okay, Harry."

"Thanks, sis," Harry said, "Just remember that you can't predict everything."

"Sleep well, love," Ginny said, giving him a quick peck on the lips.

Harry clasped her hand tightly, "Don't go, Gin. Stay with me until I fall asleep. Please."

Ginny looked at Madame Pomfrey who shrugged then nodded. She and Sam stepped into her office to talk in soft tones.

Ginny lay down beside Harry, her head on his shoulder and one hand clasping one of his. Harry's arm snaked out from under the blankets to wrap around Ginny's waist. Neither of them said a thing, verbally or mentally. Ginny listened to Harry's heartbeat slow down and become regular, allowing her in turn to relax.

Half an hour later, when Sam stepped out of her aunt's office, she found both teens fast asleep. She pulled a blanket off another bed and spread it over Ginny before quietly leaving the hospital wing.

Chapter 58: A teacher's funeral

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Madam Pomfrey lived up to her promise and discharged Harry from the hospital wing in time for dinner. Ginny waited for him in the corridor while the school nurse gave him a final check. Harry, however, didn't feel like eating in the Great Hall with the rest of the school.

He knew the other students would be curious about where he had been. He just didn't want to face them then. He still felt some guilt and horror from the previous night's events.

Ginny, knowing how he felt, suggested spending some time together in the Room of Requirement instead then going down to the kitchens once dinner was over to ask the house elves for some food. Harry wholeheartedly agreed with that idea and the young couple hurried to the seventh floor.

They walked up and down in front of the blank wall three times while thinking of an appropriate place to relax. When they stepped inside, they found an exact copy of the Gryffindor common room awaiting them. They locked the door and sat in the familiar couch in front of the fireplace which had a roaring fire already in place. They settled into a tight embrace, with Ginny sending comforting thoughts to Harry.

After a few minutes, Harry asked Ginny mentally, *"Gin, how did I get to Hogwarts last night?"*

"Um, Dumbledore made a portkey. He gave it to me while I had my arms wrapped around you and it took us back to the Quidditch Pitch. Why?"

"I don't remember much after seeing Moody fall," he replied, *"It's all vague and foggy."*

"Madam Pomfrey said you were in shock, Harry," Ginny said, "It's understandable after seeing Moody d-d-die like that."

"Some hero I turned out to be," Harry said, "Voldemort murders someone in front of me and I space out."

Ginny pulled out of his embrace and hit him hard on the arm. "Don't you dare pity yourself, Potter," Ginny shouted as she glared at him. Harry rubbed his arm as he stared at her, stunned.

Ginny's face then softened and she gently cupped his cheek with the palm of one hand, *"Madam Pomfrey said that shock is a natural reaction to something that horrible. It just shows how good your heart is, not like Tom."*

She encircled his arms around him again and laid her head on his shoulder. *"You care so much, Harry. Otherwise, Moody's death wouldn't have bothered you. Don't dwell on it anymore. Remember, you managed to hold Voldemort off until we came. Moody would have been proud of you. Let his sacrifice be another reason to beat that monster."*

"So, how did I get to the hospital wing," he asked.

"Remus conjured a stretcher and placed you on it," Ginny replied. "He, Dad and Bill came back right after we did. You were so limp with a glazed look on your face when we got back. We took you to the hospital wing where Madam Pomfrey managed to make you drink a Dreamless Sleep Potion. You dropped off to sleep almost immediately. Madam Pomfrey wanted us to go to bed but Mum, Lily, Rose and I refused to leave you. We stayed there the entire night."

"But what about this morning?" Harry asked. "I was alone when I woke up."

Ginny scowled, *"Madam Pomfrey said that she didn't expect you to wake up until noon and insisted we all freshen up and get some food. I was finishing up my breakfast in the Great Hall when I felt you wake up and get all morose and depressed. So, I rushed back there."*

"I'm glad you did, Gin," Harry said, "I'm not sure where my thoughts would have taken me if you hadn't come and convince me that Voldemort was the one at fault for Moody's death."

After a few moments of silence, Ginny said, *"Don't think about it anymore, Harry. Let's not let this couch go to waste."* She placed a hand behind his neck and drew his lips down to hers. Harry gladly let his thoughts wander off as they kissed.

It was much later when they finally emerged from the Room of Requirement to head for the kitchens and Harry was in a much better mood. They were greeted enthusiastically by Dobby and the other house elves who led them to the same table they had eaten in with their friends after the Second task. In a few minutes, the table was groaning from the massive amount of food the house elves placed on it.

As they were trying to place a dent in the food, Harry and Ginny heard a voice behind them chuckle and exclaim, "I'm glad you haven't allowed last night's events to affect your appetite, Harry."

They turned around to see Dumbledore standing there with the familiar twinkle in his eye.

"Err, hello, Professor," Harry said, "I didn't feel like eating in the Great Hall."

"I quite understand, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Practically the entire school saw you taken away and some of your classmates can be quite inquisitive. I know that it would be difficult to talk about last night's events."

"Well, they better not bother Harry or I'll hex them," Ginny said, a scowl on her face.

"Now, now, Miss Weasley," Dumbledore said, a smile on his face. "I doubt that will be necessary since I announced at dinner tonight that anyone badgering Harry about the events surrounding the end of the tournament will be seeing Mr. Filch for detention."

"Thanks, Professor," Harry said, grinning. "I doubt anyone would look forward to that."

"You're welcome, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Also, all the rest of the school knows is that Alastor was killed by Voldemort. No one among the students knows the exact circumstances of his death, aside from yourself and Miss Weasley. Now, I will leave you two to finish your meal." The elderly wizard turned to go.

"Um, Professor," Harry said, "Before you go, there is something I need to know."

Dumbledore turned back around, "Yes, Harry?"

"Harry, are you sure you want to do this?" Ginny's voice sounded in his mind.

"I need to know, Gin," he answered her.

"What happened in the graveyard after...after Moody was killed and Ginny and I portkeyed back to Hogwarts?" Harry asked Dumbledore nervously. "I was...in kind of a daze at that point."

"Ah! Yes," Dumbledore said. He sat down in an empty chair. "Well, Harry," he began, "I'm not sure if you are aware that several Aurors had Apparated into the graveyard by then. Seeing them outnumber his remaining Death Eaters, Tom decided to leave. Once you and Miss Weasley were on your way back here, Arthur, Remus and Bill went back to Hogwarts to make sure you were taken care of. Your dad and Sirius stayed with me and the Aurors to search the area and make sure nothing was left."

"Did you get any of them?" Harry asked. "What about Barty Crouch, Jr.?"

"Unfortunately, when Voldemort left, most of the stunned Death Eaters also disappeared," Dumbledore said, "They may have some form of emergency portkey on them, linked with the others when they Disapparated. However, it appears that Barty Jr. did not have one on him, so we managed to capture him. I must say that whatever hex Miss Weasley used on him was quite effective."

Harry grinned while Ginny blushed from Dumbledore's praise.

"That would be her famous Bat Bogey hex, Professor," Harry said, taking one of Ginny's hands and squeezing it affectionately. "It keeps her brothers in line with just the thought of facing it."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, a smile forming on his face, "I can imagine."

"So did you find out anything from Barty, Jr., Professor?" Harry asked. "He was the one who got my name in the Goblet of Fire using some Dark spell. I'll bet he tried to rig the tasks to try and get me killed."

"Your father and the other Aurors took him into custody and back to the Ministry," Dumbledore said, "I believe he is in a holding cell there since Azkaban is not a reliable place for prisoners anymore. We'll have to wait for him for that."

Harry nodded and looked thoughtful for a moment. "Professor, one more thing, just before you came up to me and Voldemort, something strange happened. Voldemort and I were dueling when I think we cast a spell at the same time. The spells hit each other and then our wands started vibrating. They seemed to be connected by a golden beam. Then you came and said something to Voldemort and he broke the connection. Why did that happen?"

"Priori Incantatum," Dumbledore said softly.

"What's that, Professor?" Ginny asked.

"It's the reverse spell effect, Ginny," Dumbledore said, "You see, Harry's wand and Voldemort's wand share cores. They each contain a tail feather from the same phoenix. In fact, you are well acquainted with that phoenix, since it was instrumental in your victory over the Basilisk two years ago."

Harry's eyes widened, "Fawkes? My wand's feather came from Fawkes?"

"Yes, Harry," Dumbledore said, "I was contacted by Mr. Ollivander immediately after you got your wand four years ago. Your wand and Voldemort's wand are brothers. Brother wands cannot work properly

against each other. If, however, the owners force them to do battle, something rare happens. The connection you saw last night was the initial effect. Voldemort broke the connection before it could go further."

"What would have happened if the connection hadn't been broken, Professor?" Harry asked, softly.

"One of the wands would have forced the first to regurgitate the spells it has performed, in reverse. The most recent one would manifest first....followed by the next recent and so on."

"The spells would be reversed?" Ginny asked.

"No, Miss Weasley," Dumbledore said, "What you would see would be merely an echo of the spell. It is said that if the wand was used to perform the Killing Curse, some form of the murdered person would appear."

Harry and Ginny involuntarily shuddered, both wondering how that would look.

"Well, I think that's all that can be said tonight," Dumbledore said, getting to his feet. "I'll leave you two to finish your meal. I suggest you return straight to your common room and get some more rest. Good night and Harry, I agree with Miss Weasley. Alastor would have been proud of you last night."

The two teens gaped at him. Harry turned to Ginny, "How did he know about that?" *"He can't possibly hear what we say to each other in our minds, can he?"*

Ginny shrugged, *"He's Dumbledore. Who knows how he does things?"*

They returned to their meal but found that their discussion with the Headmaster had dampened their appetites. They shared a final treacle tart and thanked Dobby and the other house elves for the meal before leaving the kitchens.

They took their time walking in the corridors back to Gryffindor Tower, unmindful of being caught. When they finally reached the Fat Lady's Portrait, Harry stopped.

"Harry?" Ginny asked, *"What is it?"*

"I'm not sure I can face them, Ginny," he replied. *"Everyone liked Mad-eye in one way or another."*

"Harry, Professor Dumbledore did say that no one here knows he died saving your life. Even if they knew, I doubt our friends would hold it against you."

Harry sighed, *"I guess you're right, Gin. Come on."* He turned to the Fat Lady and said the password, "Leo Victrix."

When they stepped through the portrait hole, Harry was relieved to see that the common room was empty except for their friends, who were huddled together at their usual spot in front of the fireplace. Even Fred and George were waiting for them.

Rose was the first to spot them. "Harry!" she cried, running towards him and Ginny. She hugged him tightly. "Have a good time together?" she asked, looking at the two of them with a smirk on her face.

Before Harry or Ginny could answer, the rest of their friends descended on them, hugging or slapping Harry on the back.

"Glad that you're out of the hospital wing, mate," Ron said, grinning at him.

"Yeah, so am I," Harry said, grinning back at his best mate.

"We were worried when you and Ginny didn't come to the Great Hall for dinner," Hermione said. "We even went to the hospital wing after eating to see if Madam Pomfrey had decided to keep you there another night after all."

"She told us you and Ginny had left hours ago," Ti said. "So we wondered where you two were. Hermione thought you two had been captured on your way to the Great Hall."

"Yeah," Neville said, "They wanted to go to Dumbledore. But then Rose used the Map."

"So we saw the two of you in the kitchens," Fred said.

"You didn't make the house elves feed you again, did you?" Hermione asked, her tone was a bit menacing. "You did! How could you? Treating them like slaves! I expected better from the two of you."

"Hermione!" Ginny exclaimed, "Relax, okay? Did you really expect Harry to go eat in the Great Hall after what he went through last night? Let me remind you that practically the entire school saw him whisked off by portkey with Crouch, who by the way was really his son, Barty Jr. Do you really think he'd want to face the rest of the student body so soon? To be in the spotlight again? You know he hates that." Ginny's voice was low but had a fierce tone to it. She was also glaring at the older girl.

Hermione shrunk back from the tirade of the younger girl. "Um, I guess he wouldn't want that," she squeaked.

"I'm glad you realize that," Ginny said, "I suggested that we just go down to the kitchens and eat there. The house elves were very kind, especially Dobby, and gave us some sandwiches to eat and pumpkin juice to drink. We ate as much as we could then we came straight here."

"All right," Hermione said, sighing, "we were just worried, that's all."

"I'm grateful for your concern, Hermione," Harry said, hugging her, "Thanks." He turned to the others. "Thanks to all of you. I'm touched that you guys stayed up late to wait for us."

"No problem, mate," Ron said. "We're just glad you're okay. Of course, I'd like to know where you guys were during dinner. Madam Pomfrey did say you left the hospital wing in time for dinner. So where were you two?" Ron's eyes narrowed as Harry and Ginny started to blush. "You didn't, did you? Please tell me you two didn't go into a broom cupboard to snog."

“Okay, we didn’t go into a broom cupboard,” Harry said, smirking.

“Whew,” Ron said, “That’s a relief. For a minute there I thought you spent dinnertime in a snogging session.” When they started to blush again, Ron exclaimed, slapping his hand on his forehead, “You did! I can’t believe it! A day barely passed since you faced You-Know-Who and you’re snogging, with my sister. I’m just glad you didn’t do that in front of me.”

“Hmm,” Ginny said, “It’s not too late to do that.” With that, she pulled Harry into her arms and started to kiss him passionately.

Ron gaped at them for a moment before turning in disgust and heading up the stairs to the boys’ dormitories. The others just smirked as they watched. When several seconds had passed by without Harry or Ginny breaking the kiss, they looked at each other and shrugged. They went up the stairs to their dormitories leaving the young couple alone.

Finally, Harry and Ginny drew back from each other and touched foreheads as they tried to catch their breath. Seeing they were alone again, they smiled at each other.

Harry guided Ginny to the couch in front of the fireplace where they settled in the same position they had been in when they were in the Room of Requirement.

After snogging for few minutes, Ginny drew back, *“Harry? You’ll tell the others what happened in the graveyard, right? Harry?”*

“I don’t know, Gin,” he answered after a couple of seconds, *“What if they blame me for getting Moody killed?”*

“Harry, they’re your sisters and friends. They won’t do that. They deserve to know the truth. Don’t worry. I know what happened and I don’t blame you.”

Harry sighed, *“All right, Ginny, but let’s leave it for tomorrow. Right now, I need a little more comfort from the beautiful redhead in my arms.”*

"My, my, Mr. Potter, such flattery can swell a girl's head." She closed the gap between them.

After another half-hour, Ginny reluctantly suggested that they get some sleep. They had one final kiss before ascending up their separate stairs.

The following morning, Fleur and Viktor came up to the Gryffindor table while Harry and his friends were having breakfast.

"Harry," Viktor said, "Fleur and I would like to offer our condolences over the death of your professor."

"Oui, 'arry," Fleur said. "We are so sorry."

"Thanks, guys," Harry said, "That means a lot to me. He taught me a lot this year."

"Da, I'm sure he did," Viktor said, "He was said to be a very good Auror."

"We also came over to say goodbye," Fleur said, "We are going back to our countries this morning."

Harry stood and shook hands with both of them, "I'm glad to have met you, Fleur, Viktor. I consider you good friends now. Hard and evil times are coming and we could all use friends in other countries."

"Of course, 'arry," Fleur said, "You helped me save Marie and we are fellow champions after all. Who knows, I may be back here soon. Au revoir, 'arry." She gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"If you are in need of a friend on the continent, Harry," Viktor said, "I will be there."

They then said goodbye to Ginny and Harry's other friends. Fleur even embraced Ginny and whispered to her, "Take good care of 'arry, mon cheri. He is lucky to have you." Ginny blushed from the compliment. Fleur and Viktor then left the Great Hall.

The Hogwarts students then continued their meal. When they had finished, Ginny turned to Harry, *"Harry? Are you going to tell them?"*

"All right, Ginny," Harry replied, *"But I think we should do it in the Room of Requirement. Tell the others."* He got up and left the Great Hall, climbing the stairs to the seventh floor.

Ginny and the others soon followed and they meet in front of the blank wall near the statue of Boris the Befuddled. Once inside, Harry slowly told them everything, including his impulsive act that had cost Moody his life. Ginny held his hand the entire time, sending soothing thoughts to him. Several times, Harry had to pause as the horrible memories threatened to overwhelm him but a gentle stroking of his knuckles by Ginny's fingers settled his nerves every time.

When he was finished, he searched his friends' faces for any sign of loathing or disgust. He saw sorrow and understanding on all their faces. Rose and Hermione embraced him as the tears ran down their faces. Fred, George, Neville and Ti each gave him a sympathetic squeeze on the shoulder. Even Maggie gave him a solemn nod. Then Harry turned to his first and best friend.

Ron clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Don't worry, mate," Ron said, "I know you didn't mean for Moody to get killed."

"Yeah," George said, "You just wanted to save Dumbledore."

"That's right, Harry," Fred added. "It wasn't your fault."

Everyone nodded.

"Thanks, guys," Harry said. "Thank you for not thinking that it was my fault Moody died."

They all smiled while Ginny squeezed his hand. They spent the rest of the morning telling each other stories about Moody and his classes.

The next three days saw most of the students staring at Harry and whispering behind his back. Most were curious to know what had happened to him when he had been Portkeyed away from Hogwarts.

Thankfully, few attempted to approach him. Harry's friends intercepted the few that did, for which Harry was grateful.

His friends, especially Ginny, did their best to keep his mind from thinking about the horrible things that had occurred that night. Ginny, in fact, decided to fulfill Ron's nightmare scenario and dragged Harry into various broom cupboards, not that Harry resisted much.

Ron, for his part, refrained from commenting whenever he saw his best friend and sister enter the common room a little disheveled. He just hoped they weren't doing anything more than kissing. Luckily for him, he didn't air that sentiment to the couple in question.

Three days later and five days after his death, a morning memorial service was held for Mad-Eye Moody on the grounds of Hogwarts. Harry and the others picked at their breakfast, uncomfortable with the silence that hung in the Great Hall. Finally, Dumbledore rose to his feet and asked the students to file out of the Great Hall behind their heads of house. He and the other teachers preceded the students.

Harry noticed that Snape was absent. He then recalled that he had not seen his Potions professor since he had returned from the graveyard. He turned to Ginny.

"Gin, have you noticed Snape around the last several days?" he asked her in her mind.

Ginny looked at him in surprise, *"No, Harry. I don't think I have. I wonder why?"*

"I don't know either. I know he didn't like Moody much but I can't believe he would skip out on his funeral. I doubt Dumbledore would allow that. I wonder where the git is."

"We'll just have to wait and see, Harry. Maybe we can ask Dumbledore."

"As if he'd tell us," Harry grumbled.

The school's students and staff walked down to the grounds beside Black Lake. There, a bronze and wooden coffin lay on a marble table

a dozen yards from the lakeshore. More than a hundred white plastic chairs were arranged in several rows in front of the coffin.

There were already people sitting in the front rows of the plastic chairs, among them Harry's, Neville's and the Weasleys' parents, Sirius, Nymphadora Tonks and several other Aurors. Fortunately, there were no other Ministry officials there, least of all Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge.

There was a small platform beside the coffin, with a podium and a few wooden seats set upon it. Dumbledore and the other teachers sat down on the seats on the platform. Dumbledore asked the students to walk past the bronze and wooden coffin for one last look at their DADA professor. The Gryffindors were among the first to reach the coffin.

Harry walked slowly forward, Ginny and Rose beside him until he stood in front of the coffin. The two younger girls held one of his hands, seeking to comfort him as he gazed at Moody's body with pain-filled eyes. After a few seconds, Ginny gently tugged on the hand she held, pulling Harry forward. They proceeded to seats in one of the middle rows.

Harry watched the other students pass Moody's coffin. Most had solemn or saddened looks on their faces. A few simply strode past it without sparing a glance at the deceased ex-Auror and professor. Harry noted that most of them were Slytherins.

Harry saw Draco Malfoy walk past the coffin. He thought he saw the shadow of a smirk on Draco's face when the Slytherin boy stood in front of the coffin but it was gone before he could be sure of it.

Once all the students were seated, Dumbledore got to his feet and strode up to the podium.

"Today," he began, "we are gathered to honor the memory of a brave and honorable man, a man who spent his life defending the Wizarding world from the Dark. Today, we remember Alastor Moody, who some called 'Mad-Eye'." He paused for a moment. "Alastor was a man who dedicated his life to defending the Light against the Dark. He sacrificed his own life to allow others to have peaceful lives. In

over thirty years of service in the Aurors, he managed to catch many Dark wizards, including several Death Eaters. He was one of the few people who were considered a threat to Voldemort.” Dumbledore ignored the gasps and flinches from most of the people gathered when he mentioned Voldemort’s name.

He went on to mention the names of the people Moody had captured and other accomplishments of the ex-Auror. “And finally,” he concluded, “he spent this past year teaching young wizards and witches the skills and knowledge they need to cope against the Dark Arts. He will be sorely missed. Let us spend a few moments of silence in his memory.”

After a few seconds of silence, he said, “Now, a few of Alastor’s colleagues and former students are here to share their memories of Alastor and say a few words in his honor. First, let me call James Potter.”

Harry gave a start of surprise as he watched his father get up and go to the podium. James scanned the crowd for a few seconds. “Alastor was quite a character, unique and strong. I first met him....” He went on to narrate a few of his experiences with Moody. At the end of his stories, he said, “It was my honor and privilege to have worked with a great man. I will always be grateful for what he has done for me and my family.” His eyes flickered to Harry for a moment. Then he stepped down from the platform and returned to his seat.

After James, several other Aurors took their turn speaking like Sirius, Tonks, Frank Longbottom and a tall, bald, dark-skinned male Auror named Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Then, Dumbledore started to call some of the Hogwarts students, like Oliver Wood, Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang. He even called Hermione and Rose. All of these students talked about Moody’s dedication as a teacher and how he encouraged his students when they did practical spellwork. Harry wondered why he wasn’t called to speak.

“Dumbledore probably feels you would feel uncomfortable talking about him, Harry,” Ginny said to him in his mind, “I guess he didn’t want to cause you more pain.”

"I guess that's true, Ginny," he replied to her, "But they aren't saying enough. I think someone else has to remind them the real reason he died, how he would want to be remembered. I have to say something, Gin." With that he stood up and walked up to the podium just as Rose was stepping down from the platform.

She raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything. As she passed him, she did touch his arm momentarily and gave it a squeeze. The crowd was silent as Harry stood behind the podium, with many having puzzled looks on their faces.

Harry gazed at the coffin as he struggled to put his feelings into words. Finally, he looked at the crowd. "I will always remember Mad-Eye Moody as one of my favorite Defense teachers. He taught us many things this year that will help us in the coming years. But I will remember him mainly as a hero in the fight against Voldemort." Like Dumbledore earlier, Harry ignored the gasps and flinches. "Many people said earlier that Professor Moody was a constant opponent of the Dark and for many years now, fighting the Dark has meant fighting Voldemort." There were more gasps.

"But unlike what most people believe, that fight has never really ended. Most people believed that Voldemort died the night he attacked me and my family nearly fourteen years ago. But that's not true. Somehow he was able to retain a semblance of life and continued to survive for the past thirteen years. Last year, however, Voldemort was able to regain his body. I know that he will want to take up where he left off years ago. We can't let him win. So Moody's fight is now our own. We have to continue the fight Moody can no longer be a part of and oppose Voldemort until he is gone forever. We will best remember Alastor Moody that way, by beating Voldemort once and for all. Just remember his motto: 'Constant Vigilance.'"

Harry paused for a moment then stepped down from platform and returned to his seat. He noticed that his parents, godfather and Tonks had proud looks on their faces. As he sat down, Ginny again took Harry's hand in hers and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Great speech, love," Ginny said in Harry's mind, "You said exactly what needed to be said."

"Thanks, Gin," he replied to her mind, "I think my parents and Sirius liked it too."

"I know they did, Harry. They've always been proud of anything you do. I am, too."

Harry felt his face heating up and decided to concentrate on Dumbledore who was again standing at the podium.

"I thank you all for your words in honor of Alastor Moody," Dumbledore said, "Thank you especially to Harry Potter for his words. Young Mr. Potter is correct in saying that the best way to remember Alastor is to continue the fight against Voldemort, because it was Voldemort who murdered Alastor Moody. He will stop at nothing to take over our world and impose his ideals of pureblood supremacy on all of us. We cannot allow that to happen for it will plunge the whole world into an era of terror and evil, not just our world but the Muggle world as well. We cannot let that happen. Alastor Moody fought all his life to prevent that. Now that he is gone, it is up to us to continue the fight until Voldemort is finally vanquished for good."

Chapter 59: The Green Lord and the White Ram

Disclaimer: Rose, Andrew and Daisy Potter, Daniel Granger, Maggie Longbottom and Ti Malfoy/Black are my own creations. Everything else is part of the wonderful work of JKR and is not being used for any personal profit.

Moody was buried in a cemetery at the edge of the Forbidden Forest beyond the vegetable patches and greenhouses, where other teachers without any family were buried. It was rumored that Professor Binns' body was buried in the same graveyard.

After the burial, Harry and his friends and their parents/guardians sought each other out.

"How are you doing, Harry?" Lily asked as she hugged him.

"I guess I'll be okay, Mum," Harry said. "Ginny's been making sure I don't get all moody and depressed." He sensed and saw Ginny's embarrassment as her face turned as red as her hair. He grinned inwardly.

Lily hugged Ginny and murmured, "Thank you for taking care of my boy."

"A-anytime, Lily," Ginny said, turning even redder, if that was possible. "I'll get you for this, Potter," she said in Harry's mind.

Harry just grinned as he turned to his father.

Lily turned to hug Rose. She also greeted Ron and Hermione who were also there with them.

Neville and Maggie were a few feet away, talking to their parents and Ti was conversing with Sirius and Tonks. Fred and George were also talking to their parents.

"That was a great speech, son," James said, clapping Harry on the shoulder, "It really told them what's going on."

"Thanks, Dad," Harry said, grinning at his father. "I just felt I had to tell them some of the truth. Ginny said the same thing you did."

"She did, did she?" James said, grinning at the petite redhead standing beside Harry, "I knew she'd be good for you." Ginny looked down as her face again turned as red as her hair.

Sirius walked up to Harry. "Great speech, Harry," he said, "It makes me proud to be your godfather. I hope my kid turns out just like you."

"With you and Sam as his parents, I think he'll be even better," Harry said.

"Gee, thanks, Harry," Sirius said, grinning.

Molly and Arthur came up to them then. Molly hugged her daughter then she hugged Ron, Harry and Rose.

"You did well, Harry," Molly said, "telling everyone that we needed to continue fighting You-Know-Who. I just wished you didn't have to see Alastor die like that."

"I wish I didn't either," Harry said.

Arthur placed a gentle hand on Harry's shoulder, "We know, Harry. It's not something someone your age should see yet. But I guess with V-V-Voldemort now active again, it was only a matter of time. Just don't let it get you down, okay?"

"I'll try, Arthur," Harry said, "Thank you."

Arthur smiled, "You're welcome, son."

It swelled Harry's heart to hear Ginny's father call him that. Then, he remembered he had something to ask his father and turned back to James.

"Uh, Dad," Harry said, toning his voice down so only his father could hear him. "I haven't had a chance to ask you this. Were you able to question Barty Crouch, Jr.?"

"Ah, I was wondering when you'd ask me that," James said. "Yes, Sirius and I were able to question him."

"What did you find out?" Harry asked.

James sighed, "I can't tell you, son," Harry started to get angry but James immediately added, "at least not here. Most of what we found out is supposed to be limited to Ministry and Auror personnel. Wait until we get home to Potter Manor where we can discuss things fully, okay?"

Harry sighed in turn, "All right, Dad. I'll wait until then."

"Good," James said, "We'll have a lot to talk about. With Voldemort now coming out into the open, we have a lot of plans to make. For now, we have to go."

"We'll see you guys tomorrow at King's Cross Station, Harry," Lily said, hugging him again.

"Okay, Mum," Harry said, hugging her back.

Lily hugged both Rose and Ginny goodbye as well. Harry and Ginny hugged and bade goodbye to Molly and Arthur then turned to Sirius.

"Well," Sirius said, "I've got to go, too. I need to get back to that lovely pregnant wife of mine. Bye kids. See you tomorrow."

The adults headed for the gates of Hogwarts so they could Apparate away.

The ten children headed back to the castle, huddled together in a group. The rest of the students had already returned to the castle. The pensive silence between them as they walked was broken after a few minutes by Hermione.

"I'm not sure you should have said anything about V-Voldemort, Harry," the bushy-haired girl said, softly.

"Why's that, Hermione?" Ron asked, "I thought what he said was brilliant. Harry really told them off. You heard Dumbledore and

Harry's dad. They all thought it was a great speech. I bet even Ginny said so."

"I don't dispute that it was a very good speech, Ronald," Hermione said, tartly, "I just think Harry should not have said anything about V-Voldemort regaining his body. People will wonder how he knew about it."

"Come on, Hermione," Neville said, "What would it matter? People know Voldemort's back. I don't think it'll matter to people how he came back."

"I don't know, Neville," Hermione said, "I just have a bad feeling what Harry said may be used against him."

"Whatever, Hermione," Rose said, "The important thing is that Harry told them that the fight against Voldemort has to go on. Professor Dumbledore agreed with that. You heard him."

"All right, all right," Hermione conceded, "I agree with both of them that we need to go on fighting Voldemort."

"Good," Harry said quietly, "Now that that is settled, let's go to the Room of Requirement. We need to discuss something."

They followed him up to the seventh floor and the secret room behind the blank wall. When they were all sitting in a room that was an exact copy of the Gryffindor common room, Harry said, "I asked you all to come up here because I think it's time the rest of my friends learn something Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Rose already know."

He looked at Fred, George, Ti, Neville and Maggie. "You see, about thirteen years ago, a prophecy was made about Voldemort, a prophecy given by Professor Trelawney. Now, I know she's mostly a fraud but this was a real one." He took a deep breath, "It goes like this:

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches.....Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies....and The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not....and either must die

at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.....the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...

“What does that mean?” Ti asked.

“Well,” Hermione said, “The first part means that the one who can defeat Voldemort once and for all was born near the end of July to parents who had defied Voldemort three times already.”

Maggie’s eyes widened and she looked at her brother, “Could it have been you?”

Neville patted her hand, “Yes, Mags, it could have been me. Our parents had defied Voldemort three times by then. But it didn’t turn out that way since there was another baby who fulfilled those requirements.” He looked at Harry. “Harry’s parents had also defied Voldemort three times and he was born only a day after me.”

“That’s quite astute of you to figure it out quickly, Neville,” Hermione said.

“Not really, Hermione,” Neville said, “My parents told me about the prophecy last August before we went back to school. Professor Dumbledore had told them about it after I was born. They decided to tell me about it when they were told that Voldemort was back.” He turned to Maggie, “They didn’t tell you, sprite, because they thought it would be too traumatic for you to know Voldemort could have attacked us as well.”

Maggie patted Neville’s hand, “That’s okay, Neville. I understand, just don’t do it again.”

Neville grinned and nodded.

“So,” Fred began, “If it could have been Harry or Neville....”

“....how did Harry become the one in the prophecy?” George asked.

“Look at the second part of the prophecy, guys,” Ginny said, “It talks about Voldemort marking his future foe as his equal. It seemed

someone heard the first part of the prophecy and told Tom. Seeing a danger, he decided to act. He found out that Harry and Neville were the only possible candidates but he chose to attack Harry and his family first. He then marked Harry as his equal when his Killing curse backfired and cause that scar on Harry's forehead."

"Then the prophecy means that Harry...." Ti said.

"I'm the only one who can defeat Voldemort for good," Harry said, a little bitter. "I'm some sort of Chosen one."

"You will defeat him, Harry," Ginny said to him, taking his hand, "You hear me? You'll meet him and beat that monster."

"I hope so, Gin," Harry said, "But there's more to it. The first prophecy doesn't say who will win; just that one has to kill the other to go on to live a real life. But there's another prophecy that's more specific as to who can win. It was given less than a year ago and speaks of several people whose help is necessary for the 'Chosen One' to defeat Voldemort."

"Who gave this prophecy?" Neville asked, "Not Trelawney again?"

"No," Harry said, "You'd actually know her."

"Who was it?" Fred questioned.

"Who gave that prophecy?" George asked.

"Me," Rose said softly."

Fred, George, Ti, Neville and Maggie looked at her in surprise.

"I've been seeing flashes of things happening before they did, like when that butterbeer bottle exploded in Ron's hand during the Yule Ball and the squid helping Harry during the Second task of the Triwizard. Professor Dumbledore and my parents think I'm a seer. Believe me, I was as surprised as you are when they said that," Rose said, sounding almost as bitter as her brother had a while ago.

Neville gave a low whistle, "Well, if someone was going to be a seer, it would have to be you."

Rose glared at him, "What do you mean by that, Longbottom?"

Neville smirked, "Since Harry seems to be the one chosen to defeat Voldemort, it just seems fair that his sister would have a power all her own." He ignored the glare Rose continued to give him.

"Wait a minute," Ti said, "We're getting ahead of ourselves. What does this second prophecy say, exactly?"

"Well," Harry said, "I think it went like this:

They gather now, they who would stand by the Chosen One,

His six companions, bonded by love deep and true

The Soul Mate, his other half, his strength

The Seer, his sister in blood, his guide

The Wise Lady, his sister in all but blood, his font of knowledge

The Strategist, his best friend, his right hand

The Green Lord, his equal in power, his general

The White Ram, saved from Evil by him, his left hand

Training they need together, to defeat the Dark Lord

Let not one be lost or all will be for naught

And the Dark Lord will defeat the Chosen one"

"So, the 'Chosen One' is supposed to have six companions who will help him defeat this Dark Lord if they work together."

"Yes," Hermione said, "that's what we figured out. We presumed that the Dark Lord is Voldemort since his followers use that title when talking about him."

“So who are the six helpers supposed to be?” Ti asked, “Have you guys thought about who they are?”

“Based on the clues given in each line,” Harry said, “I think some of them are here. I mean, who else but Ginny is my soul mate? The seer is obviously Rose. Hand down, the Wise Lady is Hermione since I consider her almost a sister and we know how smart she is. The strategist is Ron. No one has been able to beat him in chess or other strategy games. It’s the last two people we’re somewhat stuck on.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, “Who are the Green lord and the White ram?”

“I think the Green lord is Neville,” Rose said, “What’s greener than plants and who else is brilliant in Herbology?”

“How can that be?” Neville said, “I’m not equal to Harry in power.”

“There’s one way to find out,” Harry said, “Professor Dumbledore has a spell that detects the magical level of a person based on the color, starting with black for Muggles up to white showing the most power. Also, brightness of the color is another indication of power level. Let’s see, what was the incantation?”

“I think it was ‘*potentia ostendo*’, Harry,” Ginny said.

“That’s right,” Harry said, “Thanks, Gin.” He turned to Neville, “I think I can cast it and we can see.” He drew his wand and pointed it at Neville. “Ready, Nev?” When Neville nodded, Harry waved his wand over him and cried, “*Potentia Ostendo!*”

A white light surrounded Neville, almost blinding everyone.

When the light subsided, the room was eerily silent. Finally, Ron spoke up, “Bloody hell!”

“Ron, language!” Hermione chastised. “But then, I agree with you. That was incredible.”

“It seems the prophecy is right,” Ginny said, “That’s about the same level of brightness that Harry showed when Professor Dumbledore

tested him. So Rose is probably right and Neville is the Green Lord in the prophecy.”

“All right,” Ron said, “So who is this white ram then?”

“That’s where I’m stumped,” Hermione said, sighing, “If we’re right about the identities of the companions we’ve made, the white ram has to be someone about our age. Then based on the line in the prophecy, it has to be someone Harry as the Chosen One has saved.”

“That’s about right, Hermione,” Rose said, “But the line talks about the white ram being saved as in the past tense. It must mean that Harry already saved him or her by the time I gave the prophecy. That happened during the summer, before we got to school. So, the only person who’d qualify would be Ginny. But since she’s the Soul mate, it can’t be her.”

“Then who is it?” Ron asked, clearly exasperated.

“Wait a minute,” Ginny said, “Harry, what’s the first line again? It’s something about gathering.”

“Um, I think it goes *‘They gather now, they who would stand by the Chosen One’*,” Harry answered her, “Why?”

“Rose has a point that the prophecy was stated with the timing in mind,” Ginny said, “The first three words of the prophecy are ‘they gather now’, as in the six companions are already connected or friends with you.”

“Ginny’s right,” Hermione said, her eyes lighting up, “Look at the ones we’ve identified, Ginny, Rose, Ron, me and Neville.”

“Yes!” Harry exclaimed, “My soul mate, sisters and best friends, that’s right. Plus, you’re all part of the New Marauders. Therefore, whoever the white ram is, he or she was already a part of our group by the time Rose gave the prophecy.”

“Then who is it?” Ron asked, “The only ones left among the New Marauders are Fred, George, Maggie and...”

“Ti!” Ginny said, “I think the white ram is Ti. Look at the imagery. If being the Green Lord refers to Neville and his success in Herbology, being the white ram has to mean something significant with Ti.”

“A white ram,” Harry said, thinking deeply, “Wait a minute. What is the term used when one refers to a person who is at odds with his family’s character?”

“A black sheep!” Hermione cried, “Yes, Harry, that must be it. The Malfoys are among the strongest supporters of the Dark Arts. Someone who would be opposite to that would be considered ‘white’ and a ram is a male sheep.”

“That settles it,” Harry said. “Ti must be the White Ram in the prophecy.” He looked over at Ti who now looked nervous and apprehensive. “Hey, mate, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Ti said, his voice soft and unsure, “I’m in a prophecy? I’m supposed to help you against V-V-Voldemort?”

Harry sat beside the thirteen year old and clasped his shoulder, “Hey, I know how you feel. When my parents told me about the first prophecy, I was scared. I mean, I’m just a kid and I’m supposed to kill off the most powerful Dark Wizard of all time. It’s a bit overwhelming. But remember, there are six of you in the prophecy. You aren’t in this alone. Now I know I’m not against Voldemort by myself. We’re all in this together. If we stick together, we can do this and kick his ass once and for all.”

“So, O Chosen One,” Ron said, a smirk on his face, “How do we do that?”

“Watch it, Ron,” Harry said, smiling at his redheaded best friend, “Don’t bandy that title around or I’ll show you how great the Chosen One is. But to answer your question, we first continue what we’ve been doing lately with the workouts and martial arts sessions. Then I have the rest of you train in dueling like what I’ve been doing. I’m sure Dad, Sirius and Professor Dumbledore will help with that. It’ll take time but we can do it.”

Harry then noticed that Maggie had a sad look on her face. He knelt down in front of the first year and asked, "What's wrong, Maggie?"

Maggie turned red and looked down at her feet, "It's nothing," she said softly.

Harry gently lifted her chin with his right thumb and index finger, "Come on, it has to be something if you look like that. We're your friends too not just your brother's. You're part of our little group."

Maggie stared at Harry with tear-filled eyes, "I'm not in the prophecy."

Harry looked at her in surprise. He looked at Neville who looked troubled but shrugged Harry turned his attention back to Maggie.

"Now, Maggie," Harry said, "Being in a prophecy isn't something you'd like. All it does is place unwanted pressure on you. Do you really want to be in a prophecy that says what you have to do? I certainly don't want to be."

"But you're in that first prophecy," she said.

"Yeah," said, feeling a bit uncomfortable. "But look at what it wants me to do – kill someone, even if it's an evil git like Voldemort. I have no choice in the matter. I'd rather not face that monster but I have to because the prophecy says I'm the only one who can get rid of him for good."

"With this other prophecy, sis," Neville said, "Ginny, Ron, Rose, Hermione, me and Ti all have to help Harry or it says he won't win. It gives us our roles. We have no choice as to what those roles will be. You, on the other hand, have a choice. You can help us, stay away from us or even run off and hide. Now, I think you won't do either of the last two but at least it's your choice.

"Being free to choose what we want to do is something precious, Maggie," Hermione said. "It's a basic right."

"Being in a prophecy removes that and it's dreadful," Harry said. "You surely don't want something as awful as that, right?"

"Anyway, Maggie," Fred said.

"The two of us..." George said.

"...aren't in Rose's prophecy either," Fred said.

"So, we can do what we like," George said.

"Of course, we couldn't think..."

"...of walking away from the others."

"But, at least....."

"It's our choice," George said.

"You see, sis," Neville said, "The three of you aren't mentioned in Rose's prophecy. But now you can help anyway you like."

"I'd like that," Maggie said, softly, "Can I train with you guys again?"

Harry smiled, "Of course. All ten of us will be undergoing training if I can arrange it, even you. All of the New Marauders will go through the same thing."

Just then, Ron's stomach gave a loud rumble, startling all of them for a moment before they all laughed.

"I guess not even discussing how to defeat Voldemort can keep Ron from getting hungry," Harry said grinning at his friend. "I'll talk with my dad and see how we can resume our training this summer. For now, let's get some lunch."

They left the Room of Requirement and descended to the Great Hall for lunch. After the meal, they spent the afternoon in the common room, playing Wizard's chess, Exploding Snap and Gobstones. Harry and Ginny took a walk around the lake after supper, just enjoying each other's company; Harry's invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map in his pocket.

When they got back to the common room, it was past curfew. Only Fred and George were in the common room, sitting at a corner table working over some parchment.

Curious, Harry and Ginny walked over to them.

"Hey, guys," Harry asked. "What are you working on? I'm sure it's not homework since the term's over."

"Nah, of course not," Fred said.

"It's just some plans," George said.

"Plans?" Ginny asked, "Plans for what?"

The twins grinned at each other.

"Well, sister dear," Fred said.

:"You do know...." George said.

"That we've only got...." Fred said.

"One year left here," George said.

"We've decided that Zonko's..." Fred said.

"...could use some competition," George said.

"So we plan to....." Fred said.

"...open a joke shop of our own," George said.

"That's brilliant," Harry said, "With all the things you've done so far, you'd do well."

"We know," Fred said, smiling. The smile slipped from his face then. "Of course, it won't...."

"...be for a few years," George said, "We need to save some money."

"Yeah," Fred said, "we still haven't got enough galleons...."

“....to rent a space at Diagon Alley,” George said.

“You need some startup cash?” Harry asked, “Wait a minute.” Without another word, he dashed up the stairs to his dormitory.

Fred and George looked inquisitively at Ginny who only smiled back at them.

A minute later, Harry came back down and threw a bag onto the table in front of the twins. The unmistakable sound of metal came from the bag as it hit the table.

“Whoa, is that....” Fred said.

“....your Triwizard winnings?” George finished.

“Yeah,” Harry said, “It’s my third of the prize money, three hundred thirty-three Galleons, five Sickles and nineteen Knuts.”

“Wait a minute, Harry,” Fred said.

“We can’t take it,” George said, pushing the bag towards Harry.

“You can and you will,” Harry said, “Look guys. I don’t need it. I have enough from my allowance. I don’t want it because it’s only a reminder of what happened to Moody. We’re going to need a lot to laugh about in the coming years. I’ve heard from my parents about how bad it was the first time Voldemort was around. I’ve a feeling it’ll be worse. So, take it. Think of it as an investment, okay?”

“All right, Harry,” Fred said.

“Thanks, o future brother-in-law,” George said, grinning.

“Oh, shut it you,” Ginny said, punching George’s arm playfully.

“Sure you want this one, Harry?” George asked, rubbing his arm where Ginny had hit it.

“Yeah, pretty violent she is,” Fred said.

“Oh, definitely,” Harry said, “That’s one of her endearing qualities.”

“Good answer, Harry,” Ginny said, pulling his head down to capture his lips with hers.

“Eww,” Fred said, “I think...”

“We’ll continue our work....” George said.

“....in our dorm and leave....” Fred said.

“....you two love birds alone,” George said.

Harry and Ginny didn’t answer them, caught up again in their own world. Fred and George just shook their heads and went up the stairs to their dormitory.

The next day, the entire student body gathered at the train station of Hogsmeade for the train ride home. Harry and his friends took one compartment near the rear of the train for themselves, except for Ti, Maggie, Fred and George who decided to spend some time with their other friends.

As the train wound its way through the British countryside, Neville and Ron faced each other over a chessboard with Rose watching. Hermione had her head in another book.

Harry and Ginny were cuddled together against the window. Ginny was asleep with her head on Harry’s shoulder. Harry was facing towards the window but his eyes didn’t see any of the scenery.

His mind was busy thinking of plans on how to fulfill the prophecies in their favor. He knew that Voldemort would stop at nothing to win the coming war. Harry was just as determined to defeat him and be rid of him for good.

All too soon, the train was pulling up to King’s Cross Station. Harry and his friends gathered their things. Ti, Maggie, Fred and George joined them in the corridor of their train car. Harry let the rest exit the train ahead of him. He looked around and saw his parents, Molly, Arthur, Sirius, Sam and Remus coming toward them.

This was his family and friends. His heart swelled with the knowledge of their support for him. He was sure that with them by his side, he would succeed in defeating Voldemort. He just hoped that all of them would survive. It would be a long road but hopefully, if they stayed true to each other, they would emerge victorious in the end.